XIII
Tearmoon Empire
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Illustrator: Gilse

Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Patricia

A young girl who appeared with Bel.

GRANDDAUGHTER AND GRANDMOTHER

Miabel

After an arrow pierced her throat, she disappeared into the light. Now, she has reappeared, looking a bit older.

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

The Four Dukes' Families

Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

Citrina

The only daughter of the House of Yellowmoon. Bel's first friend.

Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her Empress.

Anne

Mia's maid-in-waiting. Born into a poor family of merchants. Helped Mia in the previous timeline. In the present, she is an ardent Mia devotee.

ARCHENEMESIS

Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

※ Future Timeline Relationship

※ Previous Timeline Relationship

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart. Developed cold-resistant wheat.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

Revolution

Archnemesis

Assistance

Archnemesis

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant. A cynic—but a competent one.

Sion

Crown Prince. All-around genius. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona, and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present, he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed with a specific goal in mind.

Support

Support

Holy Principality of Belluga

Rafina

The duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Tearmoon Empire

Nina
Esmeralda's maid-in-waiting.

Balthazar
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Gilbert
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Musta
Head chef of the imperial court of the Tearmoon Empire.

Elise
Anne's younger sister and the second daughter of the Littstein family. Mia's court author.

Liora
Tiona's maid. Hails from the Lulu tribe who live in the forest. An expert archer.

Vanos
Dion's adjutant and former vice-captain of a hundred-man squad in Tearmoon's imperial army. A giant of a man.

Matthias
Mia's father. Tearmoon's emperor. Dotes on his daughter.

Adelaide
Mia's mother. Deceased.

Galv
An old wiseman and master to Ludwig.

Outcount Rudolvon
Father to Tiona and Cyril.

Equestrian Kingdom

Aima
Descendant of the Fire Clan. Mia's friend.

Malong
Mia's senior. Club leader of Saint-Noel Academy's Horsemanship Club.

Kuolan
A Moonhare. Mia's favorite horse.

Kingdom of Sunkland

Monica
A member of the White Crows. Infiltrated the Kingdom of Remno as an attendant to Abel.

Graham
A member of the White Crows. He is Monica's superior.

Merchants

Marco
Chloe's father. Head of Forkroad & Co.

Shalloak
A powerful merchant who sells all sorts of goods to kingdoms throughout the continent.

Kingdom of Remno

Lynsha
The daughter of a fallen noble familyin Remno. She attends Saint-Noel Academy while working as Rafina's maid

Perujin Agricultural Country

Rania
The third princess of Perujin. Mia's schoolmate.

Arshia
The second princess of Perujin. Rania's older sister.

Story

Mia, the reviled selfish princess of the Tearmoon Empire, is executed by revolutionary forces, only to wake up a twelve-year-old again after somehow leaping backward through time. Using the blood-stained diary that came with her, she makes every effort to reform the workings of the imperial government and escapes the guillotine! But then, her granddaughter, Bel, comes from the future to inform her of Tearmoon's demise. While they may have lost Bel in a battle with the cunning Chaos Serpents, she appears once again—this time older—and with a mysterious girl...

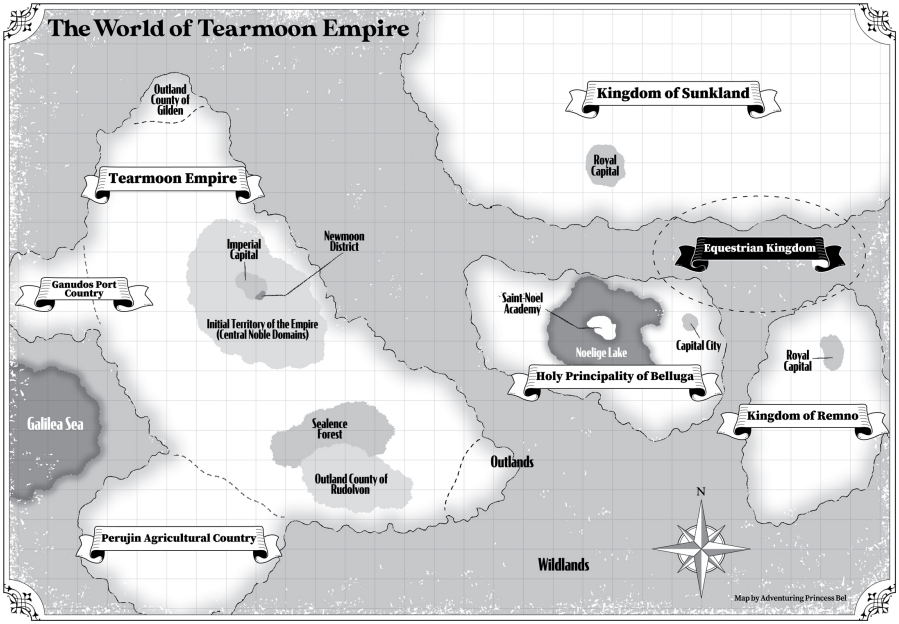
The World of Tearmoon Empire
Outland County of Gilden
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Equestrian Kingdom
Ganudos Port Country
Saint-Noel Academy
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Holy Principality of Belluga
Galilea Sea
Kingdom of Remno
Sealence Forest
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands
Map by Adventuring Princess Bel

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Characters
4. Map
5. Jnovels
6. Prologue
7. Chapter 1: Bel Is Incredibly Upright
8. Chapter 2: How Presumptuous!
9. Chapter 3: Julius's Past
10. Chapter 4: Macaron Detective Mia's Milk Mystery
11. Chapter 5: Perhaps Not as Firm as a Dried Mushroom, but...
12. Chapter 6: Chats at the Baths
13. Chapter 7: Bel Shakes the Lion's Tail
14. Chapter 8: The Judgment of the Great Sage of the Empire (Side One)
15. Chapter 9: The Judgment of the Great Sage of the Empire (Side Too...Much [Surface] Tension)
16. Chapter 10: The Chase
17. Chapter 11: A Certain Someone's Miscalculations
18. Chapter 12: Strategic Analysis... Absolute Failure
19. Chapter 13: Keithwood Gains a Reassuring Ally
20. Chapter 14: Before a Trap of Sweets, Princess Mia Is Utterly Defeated
21. Chapter 15: The Sensible Bel Raises Her Hand!
22. Chapter 16: A Decisive Battle, an Ambush, and Reinforcements
23. Chapter 17: Keithwood Fights the Good Fight
24. Chapter 18: The Battle Ends...but Life Continues

    1. Prologue: The Respite Is Over! And Mia Loses Her Cheat Codes...Wait, She Loses Them?!
    2. Chapter 1: Supple Yet Biting Mia
    3. Chapter 2: Premonitions of a Lively Journey

4. Chapter 3: Which Is Right?
5. Chapter 4: Entrusted to the Right Hand I
6. Chapter 5: Mia-Papa's Vague Recollection
7. Chapter 6: The Bud Sprouts
8. Chapter 7: Entrusted to the Right Hand II—Patty's Secret
9. Chapter 8: An Impurity Makes Its Way in...
10. Chapter 9: Cause, Effect, and...
11. Chapter 10: Bel...Lets Her Guard Down!
12. Chapter 11: Mia Grins like a Villainous Noble Lady
13. Chapter 12: She's My Second Favorite, Right Behind My Big Sister!
14. Chapter 13: Work, Work, Cake... Cake, Cake, Veg Cake!
15. Chapter 14: A Teary Ruby Discusses Love
16. Chapter 15: Mia, an Intervening Cupid, Goes into Action!
17. Chapter 16: Those Who Change, and the One Who Must (aka Mia)
18. Chapter 17: Princess Mia Makes a Visit
19. Chapter 18: Princess Mia...Makes a Misstep!
20. Chapter 19: Face-to-Face with an Agreeable Youth
21. Chapter 20: The Return of Mia-First and the Divine Revelation of the Horse Dung
22. Chapter 21: Cake Shall Be Vegetable Cake!
23. Chapter 22: Horse Racing and Wheat Eating
24. Chapter 23: Somewhat of a Side Story—What the Princess Guard Was Up To
25. Chapter 24: Mia Awakens to the Soul of an Entertainer!
26. Chapter 25: Mia, in Romance Mode, Makes an Impassioned Speech
27. Chapter 26: Aima Reads the Room
28. Chapter 27: Princess Mia Loves "Normality"
29. Chapter 28: New Shoes and an Unsettling Presence
30. Chapter 29: I'm Not Trying to Flaunt, You Know?
31. Chapter 30: The Unknowable Secret of Dancing Lessons
32. Chapter 31: The Stableman Is Certain!
33. Chapter 32: Those Who Mock Peace and Abel's Determination
34. Chapter 33: Princess Mia Rides the Wave with All She Has

35. Chapter 34: Princess Mia Speaks of Friends
36. Side Story: The Foodstuffs Assistance Team —The Girl Who Sang the Praises of the Serpents—
37. Mia's Diary of (the Lunch after) Horseback Riding Practice

25. Afterword —A Story of Regret or Repentance—
26. About J-Novel Club
27. Copyright

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Prologue

"We must never forget that a sweet dessert always awaits us at the end of a delicious dinner. A dessert made by the hands of a skilled chef is equal in quality to the meal itself. Rather, there are times that the cake served at the end is the star. Thus, we must remain vigilant. It is foolish to use all your efforts on finishing the dinner to only then lose focus once you get to dessert."

According to history books, the Great Sage Mia Luna Tearmoon shared these words with her children at a dinner party. That night, she had three helpings of seconds to ambermoon tomato stew.

However, these words are an important mindset for a statesman—just because one issue has been handled, that is no reason to let down your guard. If anything, it is after a single issue has been solved that bigger, more fundamental issues tend to reveal themselves. Mia's vassal Ludwig once explained that Mia had spoken those words in order to teach exactly this.

"Her Imperial Majesty once said that the hands of a skilled chef were the hands of a god. Hah! She must have misspoken. I believe that what she meant to say is this: the Holy Deity which decides our fates must at times act as a skilled chef."

According to records, Ludwig spoke quite merrily.

But just where lies the truth to this matter? That remains uncertain. At the very least, Mia could have used such a witticism that day.

Yes, that day...inside the cathedral at Saint-Noel Academy. Having finished her speech meant to protect the children of the Special Elementary Education Course, Mia had let her guard down. *Completely.* She was basking in a satisfaction akin to finishing a luxurious supper as she looked across the audience hall to confirm her job well-done and let out a sigh of relief.

In the midst of her speech, she had begun to think, "Huh? Bel and Rina aren't here yet..." But in the end, she decided to just

ignore it. It probably wasn't anything important anyway.

It appears that all went well... she thought, relieved. There were likely still students who were dissatisfied with the SEEC program. However, understanding had colored the majority of the students' faces. The fruits of this battle proved sufficient. Thus, Mia was ready to remove her glasses—a symbol of war—and let the tension out of her shoulders. But king-sized star desserts have a habit of appearing once the person meant to eat them had let down their guard.

"Mia. The culprit has made their move."

"...Huh?"

This mystery was quietly moving toward a conclusion.

Chapter 1: Bel Is Incredibly Upright

“Aaa...ah...” The moment Citrina laid eyes on Barbara, her body stiffened as if she had been struck by lightning. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, but she was unable to get any words out.

“Oh, dear. It’s rather crass to have your mouth gaping open like that. Heh heh! Why don’t you let me get a closer look at your face.” An arm slithered out of the small window. The sight of it caused Citrina to reflexively take a step backward. Then, another. “What’s this? There’s some damage in your hair. Have you employed a lackluster maid? Or perhaps you have yet to employ a new maid at all? Does the feeling of having another hand toying with your hair inspire so much fright in you that you now try to do it yourself?” Barbara let out a sickly laugh. It caused the blood to rush from Citrina’s face, and she took a step backward.

“Rina’s been practicing so she can do my hair in the future,” came a quiet yet determined voice. “Watch out for the stairs, Rina. You’ll hurt yourself if you fall!”

Those words surprised Citrina. She slowly looked behind her, discovering that at some point, she had made her way all the way back to the top of the stairs. Had she backed up any farther, she would have fallen, just as Bel had warned.

Gouging further into your opponent’s deepest insecurities to lead them down your desired path was the way of the Chaos Serpents... Despite knowing this, Rina had almost been wheedled into falling from the steps. She gritted her teeth in frustration.

Barbara turned her attention to Bel, grimacing. “My! Heh heh! How nostalgic it is to meet you again. I had heard that the High Priestess had taken care of you, but I see you’re still alive. She was a former princess, after all. I shouldn’t have had such high expectations of her. Same for you, milady.”

“Rina is my friend, and I won’t stand for you mocking my friends!” declared Bel.

Barbara was clearly dumbfounded by her words. “You won’t

stand for it? I've been thinking this for quite the while, but...you would do better to have a heightened sense of danger. Are you not aware that you're now our prisoners?"

"Huh? Oh." Bel suddenly recalled her current circumstances—or rather, the person currently holding her arms tight and preventing her from moving. Julius was still behind her.

For a moment, she contemplated using *that*. Yes, *that*. The forbidden technique taught to her by her dear Grandmother Mia to be used in times when bad men must be dealt with.

This is the perfect time to use it! Bel took in a formidable breath. *Wait, but...how can I kick like this?* Then, she hit a wall. With her hands twisted behind her, would she really be able to land a knockout blow?

She took a moment to think, imagining all her possible futures. The answer came to her quickly. *I don't think so.*

She swiftly gave up, determining that her escape would be impossible. Bel was known for her upright attitude, especially when it came to her studies. Sometimes, this became a source of frustration for Chancellor Ludwig, but anyway...

Bel once again looked to Julius. "Mr. Julius, were you the one who stole the silver sacrament?" She decided to tie him up in conversation so he could not take any further actions.

Buying time was important. As they had not replaced the portrait concealing the hidden entrance, there was a chance someone would realize something was off. Perhaps Citrina had something up her sleeves considering she had been silent and seemingly trying to erase her presence for the last while. Or maybe...

Grandmother Mia will absolutely find it strange that I'm missing! She'll definitely realize I'm gone and try to find me!

...Bel had never thought in her wildest of dreams that Mia would simply dismiss their tardiness. Reality is often cruel.

Still, Bel and Citrina had overwhelmingly more allies in the vicinity. If they could buy time, it was likely that the tides would turn in their favor.

It's important to come to clear decisions. If you're bad at math, who cares! If you don't like class, it's okay to skip! You can just develop your skills elsewhere, like horsemanship or appreciating sweets. That's what Bel had always wanted to say...except she'd get scolded for saying it out loud, so she kept it to herself.

In any case, the moment Bel had asked that question, Julius froze. He blankly stared toward Barbara, until finally...

"Oh...yes. I suppose I have. It's hidden in my room. I'm certain that it would be found easily should someone go to search for it."

...he easily confessed.

"Was that to save Barbara?"

"Hm... I wonder." This time, his answer was noncommittal. "I believe it would be hard to smuggle her off this island. At least, I haven't been able to think of a way to do so." He put on a bitter smile. "In all honesty, I'm not one for violence. If possible, I'd like to keep things from progressing any further..."

"Heh! You're quite promising." His words sent Barbara into gleeful laughter. "Indeed. It is useless to save me just because we are both Serpents. What we must consider is instead how we can hurt our enemies. Well, then. Kill the girl. It would hurt Princess Mia and Lady Citrina greatly, and thus would be an effective way to ruin them," she said with a twisted grin.

"I will do no such thing," stated Julius as he sorrowfully shook his head. "My wish has already come to fruition."

"Huh...? What do you mean?" Barbara was bewildered, but the conversation could continue no longer.

"That is enough," came a stern voice. At the same time, multiple men appeared, headed by Rafina's loyal old retainer.

"Sir Santeri Bandler. I believe you are in charge of this island's security, yes?"

"I had the pleasure of greeting you when you first came to this island, Sir Julius."

"Are you also responsible for not posting guards to keep an eye on me?"

"That was an order from Lady Rafina to keep you from hurting any students, should it cause you to act out. She believed it was best to lure you here for capture instead. Though we did not expect for two others to get wrapped up in all this..."

With one look from Santeri, Julius released Bel.

"What are you doing? How can you just release a captive?!" Barbara was panicked, but Julius refused to answer, instead looking straight at Santeri.

"You have been foolish," said Santeri.

Met with his stern gaze, Julius could do nothing but shrug. "I believe it is possible for someone to have a goal they wish to

achieve even should it mean losing it all. I give my thanks, Santeri, for leaving me unwatched and allowing me to come to this place." Then, he turned back to Barbara and kowtowed.

Chapter 2: How Presumptuous!

"M-Mr. Julius was the one who...? Moons..."

Once the assembly had come to a close, Mia had received summons from Rafina. The rest of the student council was in the same boat, and shortly after they all entered the room, they were informed of the truth—Julius was the silver sacrament's thief.

"But why would he want to do that...?" Those whispered words slipped out of Mia's mouth. At the same time, another memory occurred to her.

Mr. Julius... Wasn't he from Tearmoon?!

Mia had done her best to distance Tearmoon as far as possible from being responsible for this matter, and yet, the word "responsibility" had been hung on her back before she could even notice. Of course, the same logic that tied Tearmoon to the matter in the case it was a student who stole the item in question couldn't be applied here, but all the same, Mia's expression drooped.

"It certainly is a shock, isn't it? I felt the same." Rafina matched Mia's glum expression. "However..." Just as she was about to continue, they were interrupted by a knock at the door. "I suppose I'll have the man himself explain the rest."

The door opened, and in entered Julius...as well as Bel and Citrina.

"Moons, why are the two of you with him?" Despite Mia's apprehension, Bel was looking incredibly proud of herself. Her expression screamed the words, "I caught him!" How presumptuous! And of course, Mia didn't think there was any possibility Bel was the one who had caught their culprit. The Great Sage of the Empire was not so easily fooled. Perhaps Citrina was capable of such a feat. But Bel? Impossible.

Julius, meanwhile, wore the same calm expression as always. It was completely unbefitting of the situation, instead the relaxed grin of someone attending a tea party.

"Julius, I have called you here because I have something to ask you. Could you spare a moment?"

Julius's expression remained firm despite Rafina's words. "Well now... I can't think there are any questions to be asked of me at this point," he said in a calm voice neither panicked nor pained, as if he had perhaps simply given up.

"We already know it was you who stole the silver platter. We discovered it in your room. I doubt you will deny this fact, will you?"

"No, I will not. If you have found what was stolen, I have no intention of using ugly excuses."

"Was it on purpose?" asked Rafina, staring into his eyes.

"On purpose...? What exactly are you referring to?"

"I mean to ask whether you had us find evidence that you were the culprit on purpose. I believe you might have intentionally left easily traceable clues in order to reveal to us that it was you who stole the sacrament."

"Ha ha! There's no reason I would do such a thing." Julius laughed as if he had just heard a funny joke.

Rafina did not match his mood, instead responding in earnest. "There is. You did it to protect the children. I do not believe all the facts you have shared about your background are lies." With that, Rafina placed a bundle of parchment before him. "I believe you cherish children and have diligently worked to educate orphans."

"...Ha! It's quite the resume, isn't it? It was prepared for me by the Serpents. To think we fooled the Holy Principality of Belluga. Us Serpents really do have the upper—"

"You could have stolen something lighter, yet you purposefully stole a heavy silver plate. It is clearly unnatural for a child to steal something so large. You chose this object to make that clear to us. If you hadn't, Mia would not have brazenly trusted the children so blindly."

Huh? For just a moment, Mia sensed there was something Rafina had misunderstood, but...she swallowed her urge to point this out back back! Instead, she just nodded along with an expression that said, "I had you figured out all along!" How presumptuous!

"In your efforts to fulfill your dream," she continued, "you made sure to limit the damage that would be done to the children. Am I wrong?"

It wouldn't be strange for the Serpents to further attempt to muddy the problem by directing blame toward the children. Had he

wanted, he could have created a rift between the student council and the rest of the student body.

However, that's not what Julius did. Instead, he used the small gap he had created to meet with Barbara. His efforts were shoddy, a far cry from the care and malice that defined plots carried out by Chaos Serpents.

"You are softhearted, Holy Lady... Both you and Princess Mia. There was no need for me to purposely make myself so obvious." Julius shrugged and looked toward Mia. "Is there something special about you? Or is it just that the group I associate with is full of scum? Is that it?" Julius shook his head. "I am a Serpent... I despise order. My existence cannot exist alongside yours. Can you not just leave it at that?"

"You wished to be imprisoned with Barbara under those circumstances, yes?" Rafina cut herself off and looked into his eyes. "I looked into your background. Your mother is Barbara...correct?"

Rafina's question caused Mia's jaw to drop. *Huh? Wh-What did she just say? I thought Barbara's child was supposed to be dead!*

Rafina watched Mia out of the corner of her eye as question marks began to fill her brain. "Additionally, your revenge...is already over. You have already ruined your house. With the viscount destroyed, your revenge has reached its end. Thus, you decided to devote your life to caring for children in need—children who are from similar backgrounds as yourself. Am I correct?"

"I see. So you've seen right through me." He shook his head with a bitter smile. "You may ridicule me as a man trapped by his lingering attachments." He took a deep, deep breath. "I had not thought so far ahead as to wish to be entrapped with her or executed by her side. I just...wished to see her once again. I believed this was my only chance, and thus...I could not let it go to waste. That is all."

Then, he began to share the story of what had befallen him.

Chapter 3: Julius's Past

"As you stated, the woman locked away in that cell is my mother."

His statement left Mia absolutely bewildered. *Moons, just what is happening...? Was Barbara lying?* Mia pondered with a groan. After all the brain power she had put into the school assembly just moments before, smoke was beginning to billow from her ears.

"Well, everyone. Um... Let's take a moment to have some sweets and calm down, shall we?"

With that, Rania and Anne brought in a plate of macarons. *Oho! So I do get a reward for all my hard work!* Mia's smile was about to spill off her face.

The macarons themselves were the typical macarons often used for tea cakes. Despite being a far cry from the lavish cake of Mia's delusions...they were still sweets! That was all that mattered. Whether it be a fancy cake or a single cookie, sweets made Mia happy. Locked away in the dungeon, Mia had been saved by the magic of sweets, and she was incredibly thankful for them.

If you're thinking, "So any sweet is enough to make Mia happy?" then please don't speak such thoughts aloud.

In any case, her mouth now filled with happiness, Mia began to think. *Nevertheless, so Julius is Barbara's son... Well, considering Barbara's typical attitude, it wouldn't be strange for her to have lied.*

As far as Mia knew, Barbara subscribed to standard Serpent thought processes. For the sake of her goals, she had no qualms telling fibs. However...

There's something about her expression back then...

Yes, the expressions she wore as she told Mia and Abel about her past. Mia didn't think it could be a lie.

Then was Barbara deceived? But...ugh...

That didn't seem realistic either. Barbara? *The* Barbara? Deceived? Unlikely.

As such thoughts ran through her mind, Mia crunched away at the macarons. All the while, Julius continued his story.

“While you all may find this unexpected, she—my mother—was once a normal person. Despite our poverty, she raised me with love when I was young.”

He spoke of Barbara before she had fallen to the Chaos Serpents—a maid who had been impregnated by her royal master, struggling and working hard to make ends meet once she had been thrown from the estate.

“But then was the turning point. When I was seven years old, a messenger approached us with the news that the sole son and heir of Viscount Overadt had passed away. I was practically forced from my mother and adopted by the viscount, and I left my mother with the promise that I would one day become the family’s head and return for her. However…shortly after my arrival at the Overadt estate, I was told that my mother had died from a plague…”

So both mother and son were told the other had died in order to tear them apart. It’s quite the vicious scheme, but exactly what I would expect from a noble. Hmph…

The biggest thing standing in the way of welcoming Julius as the heir of Viscount Overadt was Barbara. Mia understood why the house would want to sever the ties between them…but there was one thing she couldn’t quite wrap her mind around. Would Barbara really fall for such a lie?

Infiltrating a noble household for intel should be a piece of cake for someone like Barbara… Oh, but Barbara only became a Serpent after she had been told Julius had died, and we don’t know exactly when she first encountered the Serpents either.

Satisfied with her logic, Mia once again returned her attention to Julius’s tale.

“And well, I truly was close to death…but just as the danger had become imminent, I was saved by the previous empress. My father’s womanizing had bled the Overadt Viscountcy dry, and the house was on the verge of collapse. Unfortunately, we also were facing a poor harvest. Hah! How pitiful for a noble. We almost starved to death.”

The previous empress? Isn’t that Patty…?

Mia found this to be quite the interesting coincidence, though the imperial family saving noble houses from bankruptcy wasn’t exactly underheard of. Still…there was something Patty had said the first time she encountered Barbara: “How sad…” The face the girl wore as she spoke those words flashed in Mia’s mind.

“Then...once my health had recovered, I set my sights on bringing the prosperous house of Viscount Overadt to its knees.” While he spoke of his plot for revenge, no sinister light shone in his eyes. Instead, they glimmered with serenity and intellect—the eyes of one who had completed what they had set out to do. “Bringing his once prosperous household to the ground before my senile father’s eyes was simple. Without the help of the emperor, the house was already on the verge of collapse. I simply squandered our funds and brought us to bankruptcy. This time, the empress did not reach out a helping hand.”

It was quite possible that she had grown exasperated by the Overadts’ waste. However... *It also appears that they were only helped when Julius’s life was in danger.* Mia was beginning to make a deduction, that being: *Patty returned to the past with her memories from this world... Is that not what’s happening here?* Mia had begun to think that Patty had experienced the same thing she once had when faced with the guillotine. Which would mean...

Mia gathered her thoughts and reached for another macaron. She placed it on her tongue, letting the flavor soak into her mouth. She savored it. *Hmph, this sweetness is quite...* For a moment, sweets were all that filled her thoughts. But at the same time, Julius had reached his story’s climax.

“With that, I had destroyed the house of Viscount Overadt and carried out my revenge. My father, who had played around and taken advantage of many women including my mother, died of illness in the midst of despair. With that, his house was gone. Quite honestly, revenge is unpleasant. In any case, with that, that chapter was closed.”

“And after you had carried out your revenge, you left the country and decided to dedicate your life to serving children, yes?” Rafina’s question left a bitter grin on Julius’s face.

“I’m no saint, and I had no intentions of dedicating my life to disadvantaged children. Rather, my pathetic lingering attachments had me searching for towns resembling the place I had once lived with my mother. In the slums, I was simply searching for the shadow of my mother—a glimpse at a possible future had I never been taken away by Viscount Overadt.”

After being suddenly taken in as the heir to the Overadt family, there were none who showered Julius with love. The vision of his mother he held in his heart remained static, the same way he

viewed her as a child.

“Humans are greedy creatures. At first, I thought that I would be fine dying in poverty if it was for days I could spend with my mother. I believed that’s what would bring me happiness. But eventually...I wanted to see something else: children and their mothers imprisoned by poverty claiming happiness with their own hands. I wanted to see them learn how to stand on their own two feet and escape their circumstances alongside their mother. Through them, I would be able to experience the future I had wanted.”

Thus, he dedicated himself to teaching. But then slithered in the Serpents.

Chapter 4: Macaron Detective Mia's Milk Mystery

Mia tossed a fifth macaron into her mouth; she was trying to keep a gentle pace in order to avoid angering Anne. Everyone matured as they aged, even Mia. The longer the macaron stayed in her mouth, the longer she could taste it and the longer its sweetness would last. These days, Mia was always trying her best to milk the sweetness of her sweets for all they had.

Anyway, Julius's tale continued. "Shortly before I came to this island, I was approached by a man. He told me that my mother was still alive and imprisoned on Saint-Noel Island."

As she listened to his monologue, Mia began to feel some discomfort inside her mouth. *The macaron's made my mouth all dry! Talking now would leave me coughing...* Mia was now paying for keeping the macarons rolling around her mouth to enjoy their sweetness. Having noticed her master's situation, Anne brought her a cup filled to the brim with hot milk at just the perfect time. Macarons and milk—the perfect combination of taste and nutrition. Anne had made an excellent choice.

Mia thanked Anne with her eyes before bringing the cup to her mouth. It was delicious, and the flavor suggested it had been taken from the cow this morning. The fresh milk left her mouth satisfied, reminding her of memories that were too much of a luxury for her present circumstances.

"The Equestrian Kingdom..." Those words burst from her mouth, but she hurriedly shut the rest inside. Then, she began to ponder. *I miss Equestri milk. I do hope I get the chance to relax and enjoy it again sometime.* Just as those thoughts passed through her mind...

"The Equestrian Kingdom...! I see. Damn my dull senses. Sir Julius, is it possible that the man who approached you was dressed in Equestri attire?" Sion cursed himself, realizing the same man who had laid the trap for his brother could be involved in this

incident as well.

"Yes, exactly. He had the accent of an Equestri... There was something suspicious about him, and I got the sense that he sought to use me. However...I couldn't help but ask for the details." Thus, Julius learned of Barbara's misdeeds and her insolence toward the greater nobles and the throne. "The man told me that given my mother's crimes, she would certainly be executed, but that I would be able to save her. He offered his aid in helping me do so."

His words were the whispers of the Serpents, the voice that read others' desires and used them to lure them down the road the Serpents wished.

So the Serpents were already aware that Barbara's son was still alive. But if they were to tell her that, she would instead live solely for the sake of taking back her son. She wouldn't be a Serpent anymore, and so, they hid that information. That all sounds logical, but...

There was still something that weighed on Mia's mind: Patty's involvement.

"How awful..." Julius's story had put a scowl on Tiona's face, and Liora was right there beside her about to boil over in anger. The whole of the student council found the story hard to hear. Despite the refreshing milk, Mia took a glance around and decided to put a scowl on too. Mia wasn't one to disturb the peace. She knew how to read a room.

"Still, how impressive, Mia. You were able to realize the man who approached Sir Julius is the same one we've been after." Of course, Mia nodded along to Sion's words—or actually, it was Rafina.

"Figuring it out wouldn't be hard for someone like Mia. Considering where Julius was before heading to Saint-Noel's, where the man from Sunkland was headed, and the guile at work, there's only one possible answer." Rafina praised her dear friend's sagacity. "Mia would easily be able to solve such a mystery."

There were none who denied her words.

"You're amazing, Grandmother Mia...!" Bel's eyes even twinkled in awe.

Mia's expression, meanwhile, remained composed. "Oho ho! You all really do make too much of me," she said, laughing it off. "Um... So, then...you came here in order to save Barbara?"

Julius responded with a tired shake of his head. "What my mother has done is unforgivable, and thus, I never intended to save

her. I, too, believe she has done deeds worthy of execution. Thus, what I came here searching for was something much more trite." With that, he laughed. "You may find me to be a man who is overly attached, but...I simply wished to see her one more time. That is all."

"You just wanted to meet her again..." It was Bel who nodded along with his words. Having once lost her parents and having watched her adoptive mothers Anne and Elise, along with her loyal retainers Ludwig and Dion die before her, it was a wish Bel knew well. Her usually happy-go-lucky attitude fell away to a ponderous scowl.

"I found teaching incredibly rewarding. It felt as if I was helping the world turn into a better, happier place, and I treasured the trust that those around me placed in me. I truly hoped to live up to their expectations. However...my childhood attachments and love for my mother proved too much. Once I began to think that I would see my deceased mother once again—rather, if I let this opportunity go to waste, I would never get the chance to again—I was unable to stop myself."

The way he spoke of the matter assured Mia that he was rational. Of course, the glasses he wore didn't hurt, but in any case, that was her impression. Despite being a rational man in proper control of himself, the Serpents were able to manipulate him using the one attachment he could not rid himself of. They used his love for his mother against him, and it wasn't just the level of yearning for a mother's love that any man experiences at any age. This was quite literally the final opportunity to speak with her that he would ever receive.

"For the sake of revenge on behalf of my mother, I destroyed a viscount house and pushed my father toward a pitiful death. With that, my revenge was complete, but I was instead left with another thought: had I deprived a chance at revenge from my mother? I believe her reckless violence may stem from the lack of a person to direct it toward, which was a result of my actions, and that even now, she may be shackled by an anger only death will release her from." With that, he looked once toward Rafina, and then once toward Mia.

"Is that not tragic? My mother's execution is unavoidable. But at the very least...if her heart remained a prisoner to revenge, I wanted to relieve her of that burden. That alone is my wish." His

eyes retained their usual serenity, but now, there was an edge behind them. “Lady Rafina, Princess Mia. I ask this of you because I can see your upright characters. Please let me speak with my mother. Afterward, I will accept any punishment. Please...”

Mia watched as he bowed his head. *Hmph... This sounds exactly like something a Serpent would say, but...if we properly make use of this chance, Barbara may no longer be a threat. Plus...* The earlier mention of Patty reoccurred to her. *When faced with Barbara, Patty had called her sad... If we save Barbara, we may be able to pull Patty away from the Serpents.*

In any case, Mia wanted Patty to be there at the reunion.

Chapter 5: Perhaps Not as Firm as a Dried Mushroom, but…

After dismissing Julius, Rafina looked troubled. “How worrisome. I wonder just what would be best to do here…” She breathed a sigh overflowing with worry. “First…is anyone opposed to letting him meet with Barbara?”

Mia nodded with crossed arms at her benevolence. *Yes, Miss Rafina! That’s an important first step!*

The pompous look on Mia’s face as she nodded away screamed, “It was *I* who raised the Holy Lady to the woman she is today!” If only there was someone to exclaim, “How presumptuous!” But unfortunately, Mia’s previous actions really were the building blocks of the current Rafina. How vexing it is to not be able to deliver this quip.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea.” The first person to offer words of affirmation was Tiona. “It’s tough not being able to see your family. I think we ought to let him.” The Rudolvons were quite close, and they treated their citizens as family as well. Thus, Tiona had strong feelings about them.

“Hmph. I suppose I’m in agreement too.” The next voice to come was Sion’s. He was now unable to meet with his younger brother, making Julius’s feelings easy to understand.

Keithwood worriedly watched Sion from behind. But then his eyes glanced toward Rafina. They both seemed somewhat anxious.

Moons! Could Keithwood have a thing for Rafina?

Speaking those words aloud in front of either of the two would result in disaster, but that didn’t stop Mia’s imagination from running wild. Rafina shot her a glance.

“What do you think, Mia? If you have any ideas, I would love to hear them.”

“Hm, yes…” Mia once again crossed her arms as she paused. “If possible, I would love to have Patty attend their reunion…” She put her earlier idea into words. Hearing the story of Barbara and Julius

would certainly help Patty grow in the right direction. At least it should. Hopefully.

"You'd like to have Patricia attend...?" Rafina couldn't quite make heads or tails of Mia's statement. She tilted her head and put her hand on her cheek as she took a moment to think. "Ah! You would like the children to learn of Julius's circumstances. Is that it?"

That question had the word "Huh?" running through Mia's brain, but she decided to stay silent and just smile along. Mia had mastered the art of the suggestive smile. When trying to gauge your interlocutor's approach, smiling as if you had some plan was a rather effective method.

"Um, what do you mean exactly?" Now that Chloe had asked the question, Mia didn't have to.

Rafina nodded, tilting her head as she spoke as if she was trying to put her thoughts together in real time. "I think there is room for sympathy for Julius's actions. However, it is also true that they caused the children of the SEEC program to be subjected to slander. While I would like to show him some consideration, the children were looked upon with unjust doubts. They are victims, at the very least of having been caused trouble by Julius's actions. Don't you agree?"

Chloe nodded.

"Thus, I believe Mia wants to offer Julius an opportunity to apologize, and to do that, she would like to inform the children of his situation—as to why he wanted to make this choice." Rafina's eyes turned sorrowful. "Julius exposed the children to danger because he wished to meet his mother. However, I do not believe his feelings toward the children were a fabrication. We all have many faces, and there are none who are made of all bad. At least...I have begun to strongly think that way recently."

While Mia was not conscious of the fact, Rafina's words...had moved her!

My! Rafina is super, incredibly kind. Affection must flow through her veins!

Now, Mia saw Rafina as a *tender* lion. Yes, she was willing to forgive anyone who accidentally stepped on her tail and greeted all with a calm smile. Nevertheless...she was a lion. Various thoughts and feelings billowed from Mia's chest as she reflected on what a long road it had been.

Well, anyways…I see. With this, we may not have to exile Julius. Until now, Mia was certain that this would be the last time Julius would ever step foot on Saint-Noel's grounds. However, explaining his circumstances to the students of the SEEC class slightly changed things, as just a moment ago during the school assembly, Mia had declared that they would forgive any past bad actions. Having just instilled this sense of relief in the students, it would seem inconsistent to give Julius a harsh punishment. Plus, having Julius remain as the instructor would save them some trouble, opposed to finding a new teacher to bring to Saint-Noel's. This was something Mia's sixth sense told her. It was always possible that the new teacher could be a much more dangerous Serpent, and while Rafina was of course always vigilant, her defenses could never be perfect.

But more than anything, there was one thing Mia wanted to believe in—Julius's words! Just kidding. It was mostly his glasses.

The stupid four-eyes loved to nag, but he ended up being a good guy in the end! I'm sure Julius is the same.

Mia's belief in glasses remained firm. Perhaps not as firm as a dried mushroom, but at least firmer than a raw one!

Chapter 6: Chats at the Baths

Now that the meeting with the student council had concluded, Mia...was exhausted. Just when the assembly had ended, she then needed to discuss how to handle the situation with Julius. Her energy tank was running near empty—so much so that she felt like she didn't even have the energy for supper! How terrible!

By the way, it should be stated that this was *not* because Mia had eaten too many macarons during the meeting. That would be a terrible misunderstanding.

Mia sighed. "Perhaps I should take a bath to stimulate my appetite..."

"Yes, that's a wonderful idea. I think it would help you relax."

After a long day of work, the choice between a bath and dinner was an impossible one for Mia. But today, she reached a conclusion quite quickly. Thus, Anne and Mia were off to the baths, but when she opened the door to the changing rooms, she was greeted by two familiar faces.

"My, if it isn't Yanna and Patty. Are you two here for a bath as well?"

Yanna's shoulders jumped at the mention of her name. After a pause, she whispered, "Yes," and then began to remove her clothes.

Mia found this quite strange. *How odd. She looks to be brooding about something. Not to mention...it seems like she was waiting for me.* She then looked at Patty, who wore the same expression as always. *Trying to understand how Patty's feeling based on her face alone is quite the tall order...* But that was exactly why it was worth getting her involved in the situation with Barbara. It had inspired a rare instance of emotion in her. *I do hope the reunion of Barbara and Julius influences her positively...*

As these thoughts ran through her mind, Mia headed into the baths. She quickly washed her hair and limbs and dipped herself into the tub.

"Fwaaah..." she moaned. The warm bathwater melted her stiffened limbs, improving her blood flow and making her cheeks

red. “Ah... Saint-Noel’s baths truly are the best. They’re simply wonderful!”

Mia leaned her head against the rim of the tub and covered her eyes with a towel, letting out a sigh. It was an action that screamed old geez— Erm, well, in any case, Mia was thoroughly enjoying the bath to the point of acting a tad unladylike.

“U-Um...” came a sudden voice.

“Hm?” Mia took the towel from her face and lifted her head to find Yanna right next to her. Her washed hair was fastened on top of her head, fully revealing the eye tattooed on her forehead.

The seafaring culture of the Visalians... The tattoo really does stand out. I imagine it really would be hard to live in a place where everyone knew it as the mark of pirates. Mia’s improved blood flow had included the blood in her brain.

Seeing that Yanna clearly wanted to speak to her, Mia offered the first words. “What is it?”

This again caused Yanna to shiver. Then, she timidly opened her mouth, the words slowly trickling out. “Actually...um...a few days ago...Karon asked if I wanted to steal something with him...”

“Oh! Well, I see.” Her words had shocked Mia, but she kept her eyes on Yanna. At the ends of her thin arms, her hands were balled into fists. They trembled as if she was trying to resist a heavy weight.

So that’s why she was waiting in the baths for me. It’s a place where we can talk without prying eyes.

From the perspective of Yanna’s classmates, her current actions amounted to tattling, and it would certainly earn her criticism for speaking what was supposed to go untold. It wasn’t something one would normally choose to do. Of course, there were those in this world who tattled for pleasure. But after all the trouble tattletales caused for Mia in the previous timeline, Mia wasn’t a huge fan of them.

Still, from what Mia could tell, Yanna wasn’t among their number, and the proof of that was her fists now trembling as if she was trying to endure immense pain. So then why had she approached Mia now?

Most likely, my words from the school assembly got to her. That was Mia’s conclusion. Given Mia’s speech, Yanna must have concluded that keeping her suspicions of Karon a secret was in bad faith. Thus, she decided to lie in wait for Mia at the baths so she

could spill the beans on everything. Visiting Mia's room would have roused Karon's suspicions, but given that there were separate male and female baths, it would be hard for him to catch sight of their discussions.

Aha. I see she can think on her feet. She's got a similar air around her as Bel.

While Mia was busy being impressed, Yanna all but ground her forehead into the floor. "I'm really sorry. I didn't say a thing...and you made me class leader...but I...!"

"Yanna... There's no need for such a strong apology." Mia tapped on Yanna's shoulder and brought the girl's face up to meet her own. Then, Mia began to speak. "Plus, I'm positive that Karon isn't the culprit. I have absolute faith in him."

Of course, they had already found the culprit, but Mia decided to keep that part quiet.

"But..."

"I meant what I said at the assembly. Even should he be the culprit, I would forgive him. Of course, I would also admonish him to make sure he doesn't do it again," she said with a smile. But then, a thought occurred to her. *Ah! That's right. This is the perfect opportunity.* Her grin grew mischievous. Being in a bath raised not only wits but guile for bath lover Mia.

"You know, Yanna. What's most important, in my opinion...is forgiveness." Mia believed that people were unexpectedly pushed around by the tides. It was rare that someone had the determination to fight against a wave that was already coming their way. As the wave-riding aurelia, Mia knew this well. She also knew that waves could easily be created by a single voice, and that's exactly what Mia hoped Yanna would become.

"But...some people can't be forgiven." Her voice was firm. Mia lifted her eyes to discover that Yanna's teeth were gritted in frustration. That eye—the symbol of pirates tattooed on her young forehead—stared straight into Mia's.

Mia was certain that Yanna had endured much during her time on this earth. However, she gave a contemplative groan before speaking thus. "People must reap the seeds they sowed themselves."

"Huh...?"

Yanna didn't quite follow, but Mia continued.

"Retribution is usually given. If one were to commit evil deeds before us, those who stand above like nobles and kings delegate

proper punishment. As for those who commit evil deeds where our eyes don't reach, the Holy Deity judges them instead. That's what the Holy Book says... Yeah, that's probably it."

Mia had some vague recollection of this section, but she knew at least that this was a prevailing view throughout the continent, and she made this idea clear to Yanna.

"Thus, there is no need to squander your time trapped by anger, Yanna. Instead of being mad, you should use that time to shower Kiryl in kindness."

Then, she stressed the fact that forgiveness was everything and revenge was to be abandoned—made it absolutely clear! Then, she finished it off with "Well, there are still times when a bit of frustration is unavoidable. And if a man happens to be the source of it, you just kick him as hard as you can right in—"

"Milady..." Before Mia had a chance to notice, Anne had walked up to the tub with an admonishing glare. Not to mention, Patty, who had been getting her hair washed by Anne, was right beside her, giving Mia the same expression.

"Ahem! In any case...you must forgive. Please trust me on that."

"Miss Mia... Yes. I will." Yanna gave a meek nod, a glimmer of trust unmistakably shining in her eyes.

It would be a while yet until the name of the seafaring Visalians came upon Mia with unexpected force.

Chapter 7: Bel Shakes the Lion's Tail

"I wasn't aware there was a place like this in Saint-Noel." Mia looked around the aged hallway, groaning when she saw the hole in the wall. "Is the entrance always revealed like this?" Mia looked at Rafina, who averted her eyes.

"Right, yes. Usually...there's a picture that covers the entrance."

"Yes! It was a beautiful portr—picture, Aun—Miss Rafina," said Bel, oddly muddling her words.

"Ah! So it was hidden by a picture. It must be big to hide a hole like this."

"It was," replied Bel. She glanced at Rafina before adding, "It was a picture of a beautiful angel!" with an expression brimming with smugness.

Oho! She's trying to curry favor with Miss Rafina, thought Mia. "My, I see! In that case, I would love to take a..."

...*peek*, Mia was about to say in order to curry favor herself, but she was interrupted by a grinning Rafina.

"It's quite crude in its craft. Right, Bel? Isn't it?" she asked, clearly not willing to take "no" for an answer. Mia sensed overwhelming power behind her innocent smile.

This...is the same face she made when she couldn't remember my name! Mia's instincts were telling her to stay away from this topic, and so, she closed her mouth. But there was someone who didn't.

"Oh...yes! That's right! The picture wasn't anything special. Um... Oh!" Bel clapped her hands. "It was actually terribly embarrassing!"

Rafina clasped her hand to her chest and groaned as if those words were a blade wedged into her chest. She looked to be on the verge of collapse. Mia was assaulted by a vision of her granddaughter grabbing the tail of the tamed lion and shaking it as hard as she could.

Is it really okay to let Bel talk like this? Though I am *curious about this picture, if it's so embarrassing.*

Despite her curiosity, Mia resolved to not dig any further.

Curiosity killed the princess, after all. There were subjects in this world that were best to avoid, such as *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*, but anyway...

"U-Usually, guards are stationed here, but we left the post empty that day as we weren't sure what Julius's next move would be," said Rafina with tears in her eyes.

"I see... Should he have been cornered and lashed out, students might have been injured. You decided to lure him here for capture instead, then."

The man himself, Julius, gave a composed nod. "So that was your reasoning for teaching me of my mother's location. You had your suspicions of me, and thus attempted to lure me out."

"Not to borrow the logic of the Serpents, but it is easier to deceive your opponents when the lies are mixed with truths. Plus, there's nothing better than using truth alone to trap your foes. We can use our heads too."

"I see I underestimated you," said Julius with a smile.

"Oh dear, what a crowd you've brought." Suddenly, an eerie voice reverberated through the room. From the other side appeared Santeri, his guards, and Barbara, her arms shackled. "And quite the nostalgic guest as well! Heh heh! My, and what's with the children?"

Barbara's malicious aura had the children of the SEEC program holding their breaths. Mia noticed that even Patty, who was completely frozen, seemed to be afraid.

Hmph. The dark aura around Barbara seems to have only worsened while she was locked away. It's as if she's exuding a thick miasma. Despite these thoughts, Mia stepped forward to shield the children. "This is an educational field trip of sorts."

"A *what*? Do you wish to make a pillory of me?"

Mia shook her head. "They are only here to watch, as this concerns them as well. However, the real center of this matter is him." On the other side of Mia's pointed finger was Julius.

"Ah...I see. There was something I wished to ask that man." Barbara sneered. "Just what is with you? Why did you come here? Your actions are too noncommittal for a—"

"It has been a long time, mother." Julius interrupted her.

A pause. "What?"

As Barbara gave him a wary glare, Julius took the opportunity to introduce himself. "I am the son of the fallen Viscount Overadt,

Julius Overadt. My father is the viscount, and my mother is, well, you."

Barbara hung her head in confusion. Then, she carefully examined Julius, staring at him so intently that nothing else could enter her vision. Then after a moment, she shook her head. "Impossible. You lot have come to make a fool of me after all you've already done? Heh heh! How befitting of nobles. How cruel. But you wouldn't be nobles if you weren't." Barbara flexed the corners of her mouth into a twisted grin. "Or perhaps you mean to confirm if my son really did die? You think I would lie? You belittle me. My son, Julius, certainly starved to death at the viscount's estate, a victim to the viscount's debauchery." Barbara pointed first at Mia, then at Citrina. "Neither the imperial crown nor the high-ranking nobles came to save him. When faced with starvation, they let the viscount starve, and my son died. I have even seen his body. Do you mean to tell me it was all a dream?" As soon as the word, "dream," had left her lips, Barbara froze. "A dream...? Ridiculous. That was... No..."

As Barbara muttered to herself, Mia glanced over at Patty. Her face was expressionless as always. However, her eyes remained locked on Barbara.

Chapter 8: The Judgment of the Great Sage of the Empire (Side One)

“Preposterous. My son died. How could I not confirm it for myself! How could that be a dream! A dream, but...” Barbara clawed at her forehead as she muttered those words.

Citrina felt somewhat bewildered as she watched her. She had heard the fate that had befallen Barbara—heard that abuse from a noble had driven her to such extremes. However, she hadn’t truly believed that until she had seen it for herself. To Citrina, Barbara had always been a source of fear: an embodiment of the formless Chaos Serpents and an absolute evil that for a time, she thought impossible to defy. Citrina simply couldn’t believe that what had created her blackened heart was the easily understandable and human grief of losing her son—a sorrow Citrina could easily imagine. Even now, she felt that Barbara’s face would return to the same composed smile as she turned to evil. But...

“What a farce... A *farce*. Ah. I get it. This is a trap meant to push me to my end. Right?” asked Barbara as she stared at Rafina. Oddly, she had the tone of someone desperately clinging to the last lifeline they had, as if they had been faced with horrendous betrayal. The weakness she now showed had left Citrina bewildered.

“Mother...” It was then that Julius reached out his hand to take Barbara’s in his. She trembled, but she did not try to resist.

“I am sorry it took me so long. The promise we made that day is no longer one we can keep, as I failed to become the next Viscount Overadt.” Despite his failure, he looked into her eyes as he spoke. “Still, I... I am deeply pleased to be able to meet you once again, mother...no, mom.” Tears threatened to spill from his eyes. Faced with the clear joy on his face, Barbara could deny it no longer.

“Ah... How...” The voice she croaked out trembled. “For what did I...?”

Citrina could imagine the words left unsaid, and it sent a shiver down her back. What was now before her was a single weak person —what lay at the end of the road she herself might have traversed. Having lost her child, Barbara clung to the Serpents. That was the only choice she had, and yet at the end, she was forsaken by them. Citrina could clearly see the phantom of a Serpent leave her. Now that it had toyed with her life, it simply slithered away, and all it left behind was a damaged, beaten woman.

What lay at the end of a life devoted to the Serpents was the fruits of a life spent in vain.

Barbara had sinned, just as Julius had said. Her sins were grave enough that she could never fully bear the weight of that burden herself. She needed to be judged for those sins—that fact didn’t change. Even should her unfortunate circumstance be taken into consideration and save her from the guillotine, she would never be free again. She would live as a prisoner, her life devoted to penal servitude. She would die a captive and a criminal.

But how...tragic...that would be. If that was to be her end, it would have been better should she have gone out extolling the Serpents’ victory as the blade dropped on her neck. At least, there was a part of Citrina that thought so.

“You are now free of the Serpents, Barbara.” Mia’s expression was firm. “Thus...you must change the way you live the rest of your life.”

Citrina wasn’t quite expecting those words. Mia neither demanded that she atone for her sins, nor that she serve time. Instead, she simply asked her to change her ways. And...Citrina readily accepted it. Having watched the Serpent slither out of her, Mia’s words instead sounded like this: “Until now, you were one

who would perish along with the Serpents. However, you are a Serpent no longer. From now on, you must live your life for yourself."

Mia had more to add. "Barbara, I ask that you live with Julius. Of course, since you would be a prisoner, that may require Julius to simply be a frequent visitor." Mia's voice was calm.

Citrina discerned that the meaning behind those words was as follows: Just as sins must receive punishment, wounds must receive treatment. The criminal who had been hurt by the loss of her son must be healed along with being judged. Thus, Mia had asked her to live with Julius.

Mia took a moment to think before once again nodding her head. "Hmph, let's see... I believe having you help Julius with his work might be fitting for your penal servitude. Of course, I think we'll have to make sure you're watched so you can't be telling the children anything strange, but... I believe you should do as Julius says and help him with his work."

"You plan to forgive me, Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon?" Barbara glared at Mia from beneath her bangs. Still, after a quick glance at Rafina, Mia shook her head.

"That is absolutely not what I'm doing, no. What you have done is unforgivable. You will live the rest of your life as a prisoner. Those are the seeds you have sowed for yourself, and it is what you must reap." Mia's words were heavy and offered no room for compromise. "Perhaps there is someone out there with a deep resentment for you who will not be satisfied with this judgment and decide to take your life with their own hands. Even should you pass away in peace, I am certain that the Holy Deity will judge you. Your crimes will follow you. But"—Mia paused to show Barbara a wide smile—"I'm certain there is time until that day. There are still things left that you can do until your time comes!"

Citrina's eyes opened wide. She finally knew what Mia was trying to say—she was asking that Barbara work to give her life meaning with the time she had left. Barbara had lived her life abandoning and destroying, paying neither any mind. Her life was meaningless, worthless, and fruitless. What she had left at the end was time spent in captivity. She would either be a victim of revenge and ridiculed, or she would wait for the day she would meet the Holy Deity in fear of His judgment and the blade of revenge. At least, that was the fate that should have been laid out for her.

Mia was denying that fate, asserting that Barbara's life still had meaning. The Serpents may never die. As long as humans remained as they are, their philosophy would one day rise again. They were immortal. However, it's not just the Serpents that shape the future —the efforts of a single person do as well. Barbara had given birth to Julius, and the students he taught would undeniably one day leave their mark on the world.

It was uncertain how much time Barbara had left. However, Mia was asking that she play a part in shaping the future. She was giving Barbara the chance to be able to one day face death and proudly proclaim that her life had meaning.

Mia once again turned to Barbara. "You are no longer a Serpent. Thus, you must accept your punishments for your crimes, and as Julius's mother, aid him in the good he does. That's what is left for you to do."

The shock was written clearly on Barbara's face.

Chapter 9: The Judgment of the Great Sage of the Empire (Side *Too*...Much [Surface] Tension)

"Still, I... I am deeply pleased to be able to meet you once again, mother... No, mom."

"Ah... How..."

Their heartfelt reunion had Mia's eyes welling up with tears. *Moons, how wonderful!* She nodded her head in satisfaction before glancing over at Patty, who was watching the reunion intently. *Oho! I think this will convince Patty too. What a perfectly happy ending!*

At least, that's what Mia had thought, but her sensitive nose had picked up something off—vague worry within Patty's eyes. *My, what does she have to worry about?* Mia looked around the room and saw that Citrina was anxious as well—and if *Citrina* was, then Mia had to be too.

Mia took a minute to think. She reached a single conclusion. *Yes, that's right! I might have let it go a bit at the end there. I forgot to make sure of things.*

It was a trap Mia often fell into—she often found herself thinking, "So, what does this all mean?" as she forgot the point of whatever she was doing. Not making sure you properly grasped the meaning of the events playing out before you often led to later problems. Sometimes, people's perceptions didn't quite align. There was a chance Barbara was drawing different conclusions about the situation. Thus... *I need to properly explain the significance of Julius being alive to make sure Barbara gets it.*

Mia nodded slightly, her expression solemn. "You are now free of the Serpents, Barbara."

First, Mia made sure that Barbara understood that she no longer had a reason to become a Serpent nor to act like one. Thus, Mia's heart was screaming the words, "You're not a Serpent anymore, so be kind and quiet and don't make any trouble for us!" She *had* to make sure Barbara understood this fact.

"Thus...you must change the way you live the rest of your life." She put this into words for assurance's sake too. *You're not a Serpent anymore, okay? So, you can't be living like that anymore, got that?* Mia needed Barbara to understand this.

And just to make sure she had all her bases covered, she finished it off with "Barbara, I ask that you live with Julius." This way, Barbara would be intensely reminded she was no longer a Serpent every time she gazed upon his countenance.

And Mia's considerations continued! *Those who are bored never think of good things. Despite my seriousness, even I sometimes think about—and have tried—doing silly things like writing passionate love letters to Abel during class.*

Incidentally, while her instructor never found out about this, Mia had later reread the letter and grew pale at the thought of a teacher having read it.

In any case, it would be dangerous to leave her free of any tasks. I must give her a purpose so her evil schemes won't have any cracks to worm their way out of.

Thus, Mia said this: "Your penal servitude shall be helping Julius with his work." In other words, "Live the rest of your life under Julius's careful watch!"

While Julius turned evil for a time, he's someone we can trust. His glasses are proof of that. Mia's faith in glasses was unshakable.

But just as Mia was making sure she wasn't forgetting anything else, Barbara opened her mouth. "You plan to forgive me?"

Forgive her? Huh? Mia racked her brains...then sent a glance of sudden realization to Rafina. *Was my punishment too light? Having her help Julius to take care of children would be a light sentence for a normal prisoner... But since Barbara was in charge of taking care of Citrina, I'm sure she's accustomed to the task. It seems perfect for her...*

Still, allowing her to go far off to live with children did seem like a light sentence. Mia remembered how Rafina praised her kindness with a smile after the incident of Tiona's confinement and shuddered. There was also the fact that the person with the most resentment toward Barbara was Citrina. There was no way that Mia could just choose to forgive her.

Just to check, Mia shot a glance at Citrina and discovered...she was trembling in the face of Barbara!

E-Eek! She's shaking with anger! This is bad! Thus, Mia decided to adjust the course of her words. "That is absolutely not what I'm

doing, no." She stressed the impossibility of forgiveness and highlighted that she was indeed punishing her. "Perhaps there is someone out there with a deep resentment for you who will decide to take your life with their own hands, and I am certain that the Holy Deity will judge you. Your crimes will follow you." As a precaution, Mia made clear that even if the sentence she was ordering was light, she would still receive proper punishment for her actions, so it'd be okay! Then, she added, "I'm certain there is time until that day."

Being too harsh could cause Barbara to lash out in desperation. At least, that's what Mia thought, so she put on a kind smile to maintain proper balance. Thus, she was effectively saying, "You've got time to do good, so you'll be able to come up with a satisfactory explanation to please the Holy Deity or anyone out for revenge!" She made sure to order Barbara to take the proper actions that would allow her to say to them, "I did all these good things, so forgive me! Pretty please?"

Then, one more time—because Mia knew how important being doubly sure was—she said, "You are no longer a Serpent," and then, "You must accept your punishments for your crimes, and as Julius's mother, aid him in the good he does." Effectively, she was saying, "You can live admirably as a prisoner, but you'll be living with the son you thought was dead, so it should be a great time!"

Then, to make sure she had thoroughly persuaded Barbara, she ended it with "That's what is left for you to do." It was important to make firm assertions. People are quite prone to believing whatever's said in that tone. In the presence of a wave, you should just give yourself up and let it just sweep you away. As the aurelia, Mia was quite familiar with waves.

Thus, she made sure to demonstrate the acme of considering all angles to her often thoughtless granddaughter, Bel. This was the art of limiting what could bring you harm in the future to the smallest area possible...or rather, the so-called strategy of Surface Tension. As the aurelia, Mia was well acquainted with the essence of water.

Barbara silently listened to Mia's words and offered...no answer. Still, Mia was relieved to see her eyes soften. Or, well...Mia was relieved, until she heard Barbara say the following.

"The Serpent who brought me to the island of Saint-Noel is of a different breed than those led by the High Priestess. On his head

was a tattoo of an eye.”

Chapter 10: The Chase

The moon shone bright that night. Ka Kunlou was shaken by his horse as he gazed at a sky full of stars. “Well, I sure hope Barbara’s son ends up doing something good for us,” he muttered, imagining Noelige Lake, now far behind him and out of sight. “Well, not that it matters much to me either way.”

As a principle, Kunlou avoided being at the scene of things. He wanted all incidents to happen after he—the instigator—had left, just as was the case with Sunkland and the castle of the High Priestess. Unknowing of whether his plots failed or succeeded, he held no attachments to the results and avoided becoming a concerned party.

“I can’t believe she just decided to go to Saint-Noel Academy after I went through all the trouble of setting her free. She must be starting to lose it.”

Barbara was not a Serpent of the Equestrian Kingdom. Instead, she came from the long lineage of those from the Tearmoon Empire. This meant she also had faint ties to the Serpents that came from farther west, in the area of Ganudos Port Country. Therefore, Kunlou did have his uses for her, but...

“Well, connections or not, it’s no real matter.”

The Chaos Serpents were, in principle, individualists. While they would cooperate for short periods, there were never any feelings or connections that blossomed between them.

“We’ll each work toward the destruction of order and change the flow of history. ‘That be the road of thy Serpents,’ or whatever. Well, where to next... Hm?” Kunlou closed his mouth. He put a hand to his ear and listened to the wind. Riding in the calm night air was the sound of something approaching—a horse. He cursed under his breath. It hurdled down the highway toward him. However, after a moment, it slowed to a trot.

I doubt I can outrun this. With a sigh of defeat, Kunlou turned behind him. “As I live and breathe, if it isn’t the wolfmaster. Hello, chief.” Kunlou now faced a tall, thin man straddled atop an ebony

horse and flanked on each side by a wolf.

If he found me by scent there's no running from this. Curses.

"It has been a long time, Kunlou. What have you been up to as of late?"

"I, the humble Kunlou, have been dedicating myself to charity to make this world a better place. I have donated to orphanages in the north and picked up litter in the south." Kunlou pretended to cry before letting out a derisive click of his tongue. "As if there was a need to tell you. No matter if it be a parent, sibling, or even your precious High Priestess, I show my hand to no one. That is the Serpent way."

"It is foolish to even ask, is it?"

"Don't act like it bothers you after all this time. I have long known that you are nothing but a fool with a good sword arm."

"I see... In that case, let us speak through my greatest strength." Maku began to draw his sword.

"Whoa there, wolfmaster! My dear chief! You mean to kill me?"

"Calm, now. I have no intent on killing. I am forbidden to. I am only here to carry out my duties."

"Can we not just move past this? I'm not too good on the battlefield." Despite these words, Kunlou also drew his sword. The blade was slightly curved, and it glinted menacingly in the moonlight. From the corners of his vision, he watched as the two wolves surrounded him. "You're fighting three-against-one for someone like me? I see our chief has little mercy." Kunlou glanced right and left before putting both hands on his sword's hilt.

"Hm?" Maku froze out of caution. But at that moment, Kunlou made his move. With a grunt, he twisted his sword's hilt. Along with the sound of something clicking into place came a liquid dripping out of where his hands were. That liquid mixed with the powder he was holding, and... *Bang!* There was a blinding flash of light.

Listening to the feeble growls of the wolves and Maku's groans, Kunlou turned his horse around. "I wonder how long that'll keep him busy for..." With that offhand remark, Kunlou's horse was off. As an Equestri, he handled the reins with skill, rushing off into the plains as he put Maku behind him.

However, he was unlucky...for tonight was a full moon. And...

"You shall not escape..."

His pursuer was none other than the best rider of the Fire Clan.

Kunlou turned behind him to find Maku straddling his horse and steadily closing the distance between them.

Man, is he fast. Not to mention those wolves know my scent. I don't think there's any escaping this. But just then, a noise made its way into his ear—the burbling of a river.

"Ah, so this is it..." A wide stream came into vision. The moon glittered on its surface as it splashed water into the air and roared. The waters were rough and fast—too fast to pass on horseback. The river made its way toward Kunlou's right, and in the waters was a single boat like a fallen leaf carried by the stream. It headed straight down the river, and so did Kunlou. He galloped alongside the shore, patting his horse's neck.

"This is the end for us. Be happy." Kunlou used his sword to cut through the bridle and stirrups, the equipment that united horse and man. Then, he jumped from his horse's back and into the river. For a moment, he simply floated. He gazed at the moon in the sky as he continued to fall and fall...but the next moment, his butt hit hardwood.

"Ouch..."

"Hey, now. You all right? You one of the remaining shamans that used to be with the High Priestess?"

Kunlou looked up to find a long-haired man. He wore a blue bandana on his forehead, and his eyes took on a menacing glint.

"Are you the Serpent from the west that took Barbara to Saint-Noel's?"

"Hmph. Seems like I was right... Hm?" The man suddenly looked up. Kunlou followed his gaze to find a man in all black, the moon shining behind him.

"I believe I said you shall not escape." He dexterously landed on the boat before immediately pulling out his sword.

"Hey, now. This is my ship. Where are your manners?"

The sound of clinking metal reverberated in the air now filled with sparks. Maku's attacker was none other than the bandana-wearing man, and he had closed in in an instant. Maku had parried his side slash, but it had caused the boat to wobble. It threw off his balance.

With a shout, the man with the bandana made for a second attack. This time, he kicked straight into the center of Maku's torso, flinging him from the ship. The whole time, Kunlou was desperately clinging to the vessel as he watched the action unfold.

“Man, is that really the best of the High Priestess’s men?” He gave a light shake of his arms and an equally light grin. “Like I said, he should have been more afraid standing on this ship.”

“I wonder... Whup!” Kunlou reached out his arms to catch the flying blue bandana with a bitter grin. It had flown from the man’s head from the strength of Maku’s earlier attack.

“I see. He’s not half bad.” He glared into the water in which Maku had disappeared with a vicious grin.

I always thought the chief was a monster, but this guy’s just as much of one.

Kunlou let out an exasperated sigh. “Where are we headed?”

“Good question. I was thinking I should show my face back home every once in a while.” The man laughed. His face was lit by the light of the moon, and from between his bangs was the striking image of an eye.

Chapter 11: A Certain Someone's Miscalculations

Santeri led Barbara away.

Ugh... She really left us with some outrageous info at the end there...

That was info about a new group of Serpents, of course. A group of Serpents that were Yanna and Kiryl's ancestors, the Visalians. With this bomb dropped right at the end of cleaning up all that had to do with Barbara, Mia's brain was about to erupt in smoke.

No, we can't have this! For now, we should celebrate that we've solved one of the problems facing us. It's important to solve what's immediately before you first. We can save the new things to think about for later.

Having decided to bequeath issues of tomorrow to herself of tomorrow, Mia took a moment to get things straight in her head. At the very least, Barbara should no longer be a problem. All that was left now was to wait for Rafina's verdict, but her punishment shouldn't be too harsh.

Miss Rafina's a gentle lion! She wouldn't decide on anything cruel. I think this should all be fine, considering she was even able to forgive Bel. That leaves...

Mia glanced over to Julius, who had been left behind. There was still something left for him to do. He slowly approached the children of the SEEC program.

"I am deeply sorry." He bowed his head. Then, he began to tell his tale. He spoke of his sins, the truth that the woman who was just before them was his mother, the crimes she committed that led to her imprisonment at Saint-Noel Academy, and the fact that he himself had stolen the silver platter in order to meet her. He made no excuses, instead relaying the truth with little emotion.

"I could have cleared all the doubts cast upon you, but I did not. As a result, I exposed you all to danger. I have no intention of

making excuses for my sins. I only have my apologies to give."

Julius's words had left the children dumbfounded. So much was perhaps only natural considering all they had been through. It would take some effort to simply understand the situation. But what Mia had miscalculated was Yanna's reaction. She simply stared at him, silently.

This isn't what I was expecting. Mia groaned. She thought she had explained everything in the baths the other day, but that didn't seem to be the case... *That talk about how the Serpents are related to the Visalians must have gotten to her.* There was a man making moves behind the scenes with the same eye tattooed on his forehead. Of course that would shock Yanna. *In which case, I'll have to...*

With the utmost composure, Mia went to step forward...but then she stopped. There was steam rushing out of her ears. *M-Moons! I can't think of anything to say!*

Having used all her sweets reserves in her conversation with Barbara, Mia's (sugar) tank was now running on empty. Silence took over, and the flow of the conversation became completely unpredictable.

A single voice spoke up. "But...Mr. Julius did it to meet his mom, right?" It was Yanna's younger brother and youngest of the class, Kiryl. Though the older kids were silent, he did his best to speak. "I...I... If I could see my mom again, I would do what Mr. Julius did too. And if I didn't have my sister...if I could see her again...I'd be bad."

"Kiryl..." Yanna's eyes were wide. No one had expected Kiryl to speak here.

"So...I don't think Mr. Julius is bad." His words tapered into nothingness, but they still made their mark on the others' hearts.

"Yeah... I don't think Mr. Julius is bad either."

"Me too..."

After Karon got the ball rolling, the other students voiced their agreement one by one. Julius watched them with wide eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words made their way from his lips. He was instead simply silent, taking in their words in full.

Meanwhile, Mia realized she was wrong. There was no need for her to explain that there were some who could be forgiven and some who could not. The SEEC kids understood Julius's feelings fully, for they all pined for their mothers just as he did. While the older boys might not have given in, Kiryl made no effort to obscure

how he felt. If there was a way to see his mother, he would do anything to see her again.

Oho! How cute! He made sure to add Yanna in there too. Seeing Kiryl care for his sister inspired some maternal feelings in Mia. She felt like Big Sister Mia (who was actually twenty-five).

While all the kids spoke, one waited until the time was right to say, "I...I still wanna be taught by Mr. Julius." It was none other than Yanna, the class leader. She had quite the wits, for she properly discerned that even should Julius be forgiven, there was no way he would be allowed to stay at Saint-Noel's. Knowing this, she beat whoever could say this to the punch.

She really is quite smart... Mia gazed in awe as she watched over the rest of the conversation.

"I...I want Mr. Julius. He knows how we feel! He listens to me, and he apologizes when he's done wrong. I want him to teach us!" She turned to Rafina and bowed. "Miss Rafina, please keep Mr. Julius as the teacher of the Special Elementary Education Course."

"Hm..." Rafina scowled.

My, that's odd. I was sure she would immediately give the okay.

Mia tilted her head in question, but after some thought, she realized her hesitation was only natural. Julius was a thief. While there was room to consider the extenuating circumstances, things could not just stay as they were.

Life suddenly returned to Rafina's face after a moment of thought. "Ah, that's it! How about this?" She put on a mischievous grin. "I think it would be hard to leave things as they are, so..." Her grin was now genuine. "Why don't we all have a cooking party together?"

She said something that was chilling to the bone.

"...Huh?"

A victim to the sharp arrow of these words, someone let out a breath. But who it exactly was remained unclear.

Chapter 12: Strategic Analysis… Absolute Failure

Keithwood was known for his prowess with a sword. It was an innate talent of his, yet he never let that fact lead to arrogance. He continued his training, gaining a sword arm that could rival even the genius Sion's.

But it didn't end there. In order to support Sion once he became king, Keithwood studied war tactics and strategies, surpassing a normal vassal in his capabilities. Should he be demanded to fight, he would do so with the power of a demon, and should he be demanded to lead an army, he would do so with the skills of a seasoned commander. He trained himself to be able to do so, and thus, he had an eye for war tactics, and right now, it was telling him that this was a losing battle.

The reason for that was clear. As a war orphan, the fate of the students of the SEEC program was not one he was unrelated to. He also held much sympathy for Julius's ideals. Keithwood believed that people like him were necessary in this world, and it would be wrong to simply dismiss him.

Thus, Yanna's appeal to Rafina had moved him, albeit unrealized by the man himself. That was why…he had let his guard down. The moment he saw Rafina's sweet smile, he should have known—things were about to take a turn for the worse.

"A losing battle… Wait. I can't just simply accept that as fact." As he rushed through the hallways, he began to think. "Battles require numbers. To escape death, one needs someone they can rely on for strength."

His sense for military affairs was telling him that he lacked strength—in other words, numbers. Every time he recalled the dastardly thing, he shivered in fear. Mia's giant horse-shaped bread still haunted his dreams. Just imagining what might have happened to Sion should he have eaten that massive dough ball tied Keithwood's stomach into knots. It was a truly dreadful battle.

However, the trustworthy comrade it had earned him, Sapphias, was not here.

"I deeply lament Lord Sapphias's absence. I hope he is doing well." Keithwood looked to the night sky above and saw a single star twinkle. To Keithwood, that star looked like Sapphias at home in the Empire.

His symptoms had become quite troubling.

For now, Keithwood shook his head to rid him of any unnecessary thoughts. First, he needed to get the situation straight in his head.

"My enemies are Princess Mia and Miss Chloe... I must watch them with the utmost vigilance."

It was impossible to imagine what those two might get up to should he turn his attention away. With Mia, it was mushrooms, and with Chloe, it was exotic hidden seasonings. To keep them from doing bad, they needed constant surveillance.

"Princess Mia's granddaughter, Miss Bel...shouldn't prove a problem." Of course, she couldn't be counted as a number on his side, but at the very least, Keithwood thought the possibility of her trying to slip something weird into the food was low. "It should be fine to put her in with the other SEEC students. Under proper direction, she seems like she would do proper work. And as for the daughter of Duke Yellowmoon...well, she is skilled with mixing poisons, so she should be good at cooking...I suppose?" Keithwood took a moment to think. "Yup! There's little difference between cooking and mixing medicines. It will be fine!"

Keithwood had been bamboozled! Thinking from purely a strategic standpoint, it should have been clear that these types of optimistic assumptions were incredibly dangerous.

In any case, Citrina was admirably lumped in with Tiona, in other words, the group of those who could be used depending on what that specific use was.

"Now, just what should I make of Princess Rania? She's new to the mix..." In just ten days, Rania, princess of Perujin Agricultural Country, would return to her homeland for the Thanksharvest Festival. If Keithwood wanted to count her among his numbers, the cooking party would have to happen before she left. She had deep knowledge of foods and agriculture, but it was unclear whether that extended to cooking. "I should confirm first, but...Perujin is growing in influence due to the Great Famine. Plus, an organization under

Princess Mia is to be placed there. Princess Rania must be a part of that, which means I cannot look down on her."

In other words, Keithwood couldn't just casually ask if she could cook. He needed to tread carefully.

"I wonder how Miss Rafina is in the kitchen..." During the ceremonies she took part in, she would often break bread. At the very least, she should've been able to do that much. "Hm... Well, I doubt she would add in anything strange. She's most likely to do exactly as I tell her. I shouldn't worry." But just as he reached that conclusion, he got a bad premonition. "No, but...Miss Rafina has quite the soft spot for Princess Mia. If she were to ask her to do it, there's a chance she would simply listen and put in something strange. Something like mushrooms, for example..." Thus, he couldn't place his trust in her.

"Prince Abel should simply do whatever is asked of him, so I doubt he'll do anything strange. That leaves Miss Tiona... She should be fine. Right. I'll have those three cut vegetables. That just leaves their attendants..." Keithwood recalled the previous cooking lesson and hung his head as he offered himself the empathetic words "That was hard, but you did good."

He had heard that Mia's maid, Anne, had grown better at cooking. While Liora's skills remained static, she probably had learned some common sense at least. If he asked her to put something in the oven, she would do that without burning anything. Probably... Maybe. No, certainly!

"I wonder about Princess Rania's attendant. Coming from Perujin, there's a chance they're amazing. I believe it's worth having my hopes about them. That only leaves Lynsha, Miss Bel's maid. I wonder if I can use her..." This time, it wouldn't just be the members of the student council. He'd also have to watch over the children in the SEEC program. "That means experienced chefs who can take command are me, Miss Lynsha, and Rania's attendant... Is that it? Is that really it?"

Keithwood crossed his arms as he walked through the halls. It would be a little while longer until he came to know his true comrade in arms in this battle, Monica.

Chapter 13: Keithwood Gains a Reassuring Ally

"I suppose soup would be good tonight." A lone woman stood inside the abandoned kitchen. It was Rafina's maid, Monica. Since she left the Wind Crows and began to work under Rafina, preparing the Holy Lady's supper had become an important task of hers.

The work of the Holy Lady was exhausting. Even after entrusting the student council to Mia, she was still as busy as always. Her duties did not end at ceremonies either; at times, she was required to give sermons on the Holy Book to other students, or to have private conversations with the top brass of foreign nations. Mitigating the tensions between Sunkland and the Equestrian Kingdom that had occurred last year was an extension of this, and the heavy burden of maintaining peace and stability on the continent forever weighed on her shoulders.

And then there were the Chaos Serpents. The psychological toll they required was beyond what she had imagined.

Due to this, Rafina was often too busy for her meals. On nights like those, it was Monica's job to prepare them for her. However, of course, these meals couldn't just be *anything*. They had to be both good for the body and the taste buds. Monica hoped that by fulfilling these qualifications, they would help relax Rafina's body and soul.

After quickly chopping up some vegetables and giving them a good long simmer—just as their aroma began to make their way to her nostrils—she suddenly noticed a presence. "Who goes there?" As she let out a shout, she took the cooking knife she had just used into her hands. She held it in a backhand grip, turning her attention to the sudden and mysterious presence so that she would be ready to react at any time.

Of course, she knew it was possible that it was just a student here for water, but given the effort they had taken to hide their presence, she found them suspicious. However...

“My apologies. I did not mean to startle you.”

“You’re…Sir Keithwood.”

The person who appeared before her was none other than Sion Sol Sunkland’s most trusted vassal, Keithwood. It seems he had grown suspicious of her presence as well.

“Is something the matter? It’s quite rare to be in the kitchen so late…”

“That is my line…Miss Monica.” Suddenly, Keithwood was unable to avert his gaze from the simmering vegetables. “And that would be…”

“…Vegetable soup.”

“Vegetable…” He paused. “*Soup*?!”

Monica didn’t quite know what to make of the surprise on Keithwood’s face. Was this really so shocking?

“I am hesitant to make this request, but…may I have a bite?”

“Huh? Are you hungry?” His unexpected question had her spitting out her gut reaction. Given that he was at the dining hall late at night, that made sense, but…

“Oh, no. That’s not quite it. How should I put this…?”

Keithwood was rarely so flustered, and Monica couldn’t help but show him an awkward smile. “In that case, I shall allow you to taste the dish for poison before I bring it to Miss Rafina.” Monica poured some of the soup into a cup. Keithwood gingerly sipped at its steaming contents.

“H-How marvelous! It tastes incredibly normal!”

“Um… Are you trying to pick a fight?” Once again, Monica was unable to hide her initial reaction.

“Ah, my apologies. I simply meant that it was so delicious I was taken by surprise.” Keithwood’s expression suddenly turned serious. “If this is the case, I must simply ask. Miss Monica, I have an earnest request. Could I borrow some of your time later?”

Faced with Keithwood’s intense expression, Monica could only meekly stare back and say, “You’re not trying to hit on me, are you?”

“No, I am not. It’s just…” Keithwood panically denied the accusation. He exhibited the same desperation of someone imploring the help of reinforcements who appeared right when they were on the brink of death.

Monica couldn’t help but laugh. “I kid, Sir Keithwood. However, there are many of Miss Rafina’s maids who are not

accustomed to young lords and nobles. I believe it best to refrain from saying anything that might lead them astray."

"I-I see. Yes, you're absolutely correct." Keithwood gave an earnest nod.

Pleased, Monica glanced back at the soup. "Once I deliver this, I should have some time. Please just wait here."

Keithwood nodded with no hesitation.

After leaving Rafina's room, Monica made her way to the kitchen, contemplating just what Keithwood might be wishing to speak to her about. After faithfully waiting for her return, Keithwood looked to her as if she were his guardian angel. Monica couldn't help but grimace once she had been filled in on the situation.

If it is Miss Rafina who made the suggestion, this absolutely cannot end in failure. It would be best to ensure this succeeds to maximize Miss Rafina's enjoyment as well.

Monica was in. "If this is to be done with the SEEC class, there will be many to keep track of. I suggest splitting them into groups, making sure that there is one person who can properly take the lead in each."

"I see... So we are to divide and conquer." Keithwood scowled with a groan.

"Sir Keithwood, you are forgetting to watch your words." After that cold-blooded quip, Monica took a moment to think. "Are you perhaps not skilled in trickery, Sir Keithwood?"

Keithwood chuckled. "I do hope one day I will be, but not presently..."

"It is nothing to be ashamed of. A knight of Sunkland should first be a blade to slay enemies of justice fair and square. But..." Monica fell into silent pondering.

Later, Keithwood would come to learn the wiles of the Wind Crows—the essence of espionage warfare that can manipulate your opponents' hearts like putty in the hand.

Chapter 14: Before a Trap of Sweets, Princess Mia Is Utterly Defeated

It was the afternoon of the following day, the moment of respite that came just when classes were over. For Mia, this was usually defined by a snack and a bout of sleepiness. She sat inside her room and yawned, yet she was not afforded the luxury of stretching out in her bed. Instead, she groaned, scowling at her desk with folded arms.

Yes, Mia was in deep thought. Deep thought about...

"Well, it is Miss Rafina's idea after all... For the sake of the children of the SEEC program and Mr. Julius too, I cannot allow this to fail."

...a certain cooking party in the name of forging friendships.

The decision on what to do about Julius had been all but reached, so it no longer had much direct connection to the event, but that was a separate matter. More important was what would happen should everyone be disappointed by the result of their horse-shaped bread.

"That wouldn't help in forging friendships, would it? We'll have to avoid that at all costs."

Rafina was trying to bring the ordeal to a nice close. Thus, Mia had to make sure that this sandwich-making festival was a great success. At the very least, Mia wouldn't feel all too great if her genius horse-shaped bread was not enough to save the event from failure.

"Perhaps this calls for me taking the reins and giving my ideas like last time." Despite the heavy weight this would put on Keithwood's shoulders, Mia turned to sinister plots with perfectly upright intentions. "We should make it perfectly three-dimensional...and give it gorgeous wings. *Wings*... Ah! Yes, we can use the mushrooms to simulate the texture of feathers. In that case, we'll need to start with some mushroom hunting..." She began to draw a diagram of the sandwich in her notebook.

“Excuse me, Miss Mia...” Suddenly, there was a voice.

“Chloe! What brings you here?”

Chloe opened the door. She stared at Mia intently, a book in hand.

“My! What is that for?”

“I did some preliminary research to help with our sandwich making...” She was completely serious.

It put a smile on Mia’s face. “Oho! I see we were on the same page.” Mia gave a satisfied nod at her book buddy’s words before looking to the book in Chloe’s hand. “What’s inside, exactly?”

“It covers recent cooking trends. Monica lent it to me.”

“My, she did?” For a moment, Mia was stuck on the unexpected name, but she quickly changed gears. She clapped her hands and said, “I see. She is from an intelligence organization, after all. Miss Rafina must have asked her to gather some information.” Mia nodded, satisfied by her own explanation.

“I thought there may be some ideas for the sandwiches, so I read it thoroughly, and...” Chloe opened the book atop Mia’s desk.

“Oho! Did you find anything?”

“Yes, I found quite a few ideas. For example, there are these sandwiches made with fruit and whipped cream...”

Those words had Mia’s eyes pried open in wonder. “Moons! Does such a thing truly exist? And it’s made with bread, not cake?” Mia rushed to read the page herself and was shocked to find a picture of bread sandwiching whipped cream. Inside were fruits cut into small bites.

Mia had eaten something similar with ham inside instead, but she had never imagined even in her wildest dreams that something so sweet could be put inside bread.

“Oh... But I suppose bread is eaten with jam or honey as well, so it’s not at all strange to eat it with fruit and whipped cream!”

“I had no idea a food like this existed either. I’m ashamed to call myself a merchant’s daughter. It appears that it was a famous chef who created the dish and it’s awfully sweet and delicious. Monica said something sugary would probably be a hit with the children as well...”

“Yes, she’s absolutely right. There’s never been a child who doesn’t love sweets. I’m sure even Patty does... Then, let’s go with this. I can see no drawbacks.”

Sweet sandwiches had begun to fill every corner of Mia’s brain.

“I would especially recommend this version filled with scarletmoon strawberries and whi—”

“Scarletmoon strawberries?! That’s not a sandwich—it’s a whole cake! Is a sandwich like this really allowed to exist?!” Mia took Chloe’s book into her trembling hands and read it in rapture.

“Monica even marked it as something that caught her eye.”

“Just as expected from an ex-Wind Crow... All information is at her fingertips.”

An ebullient smile filled Mia’s lips, but she had no idea that this was all part of a covert operation by Keithwood (featuring Monica). Thus, the Mushroom Empress fell for the sweet trap—a rare instance where the Great Sage of the Empire faced complete defeat in espionage warfare.

Chapter 15: The Sensible Bel Raises Her Hand!

The battle was set to begin on the first day of the week. According to the religion of the Central Orthodox Church, this day was known as the Holy Day of Sabbath, and it was a day of worship and rest from both work and school. Free from the fetters of professional duties, it was a day the heart was at peace...or at least, it should have been.

One among those who entered the cathedral once service had concluded had a heart of unrest. This, of course, was the worldly wise man Keithwood. “It will be all right... I did what I needed to. I have made all the proper preparations. There should be no issues...” he muttered to himself. Then, he suddenly remembered the advice of his comrade in arms, Monica.

Worried about the future, Keithwood had said, “No matter how much we prepare, I cannot shake my unease.”

In response, Monica put on a sympathetic yet troubled smile. “Sir Keithwood...” She gave him two pats on the shoulder. “There are times where no matter how hopeless, we must press onward.”

“Well, I suppose you’re right!” he said. Like having to fight two domesticated wolves, for example. He was certain she was about to tell him something like “There are times where no amount of preparation can save the day, so relax.” Instead, she had dug even further in the wound and told him to give up. What terribly unkind advice. Keithwood couldn’t help but hang his head and wonder, *Was that advice? Was she trying to cheer me up?*

Monica Buendia was a woman trained by the Wind Crows, abused by the Kingdom of Remno, and now working for Rafina. However, she was even tougher than she seemed.

Keithwood recalled her all-knowing expression as she shared those words and muttered, “No, I suppose that wasn’t advice, was it?” with a bitter grin.

Once the morning Holy Day service concluded, the students of Saint-Noel Academy were blessed with free time. There were no classes or other events. They could eat lunch at the dorms' dining hall, head into town, or do whatever else they pleased on their one day of rest. At least, that's how it usually went, but today, the students of the SEEC program and the members of the student council had gathered in their office. Once all were accounted for, they headed to the back of the kitchens where Julius was already at work preparing the cream.

The cream used in the average cake was extracted through separating freshly squeezed milk. The chemical used in this process was called "royal aurelia powder." It was incredibly absorbent, and it pulled the liquids to the bottom leaving the lighter cream to collect at the top in a process known as "agimalaxation." While raw milk would naturally separate when left alone, the discovery of royal aurelia powder led to dramatic advancements in the separation process.

However, that didn't mean there was zero work that needed to be done by human hands. Should this magic absorbent powder not be properly mixed in, the separation would remain incomplete. This would make it harder for the cream to properly fluff and would also negatively affect its taste. Additionally, the powder gained elasticity the moment it began to absorb liquid, making it tough to mix. Thus, sweat glistened on Julius's forehead as he mixed a batch in a large tub. Still, his arms did not stop, and the spatula he held in both hands continued to move.

This was a chance for Julius to make amends. He would make this day a fun one for the children to remember.

"Hello, everyone. I believe it will take me a while longer, but I should be able to deliver you all the cream once the bread is done." He sighed with a smile.

"I'll help you, Mr. Julius!" said Kiryl, but Julius shook his head.

"You all have a different task. Please leave this one to me," he declared.

After gazing upon Julius's intense efforts, the group returned to the kitchen. There, they once again explained how this cooking party would go down.

"Today we would like you to make whipped cream and

scarletmoon strawberry sandwiches," announced Keithwood in a booming voice. This was the scheme he had put together with Monica. In other words, it was a diversion. Through this relatively safe menu, they would distract Mia and the others. Whipped cream and scarletmoon strawberry sandwiches could hardly create any big issues...hopefully. It was also unlikely they would be able to make any disastrous modifications...hopefully.

In any case, a battle of espionage warfare began with the goal of distracting the two most dangerous members. The best plots were ones the target happily walked into. Through purposefully leaking attractive information, they would lead those two away from anything else they might have had on their minds.

"Right... Yes, it does sound perfectly tasty, but..." Rafina's face suddenly grew clouded. "But what about...horse-shaped sandwiches?"

"Miss Rafina..." Monica quickly stepped forward, but...

"Keithwood has taught me the recipe, and I was hoping to make them with Mia sometime and get her advice." There were no chinks in her armor. "Yes, Mia's advice... Just the two of us would be... I suppose the children would have quite a few questions if we did them together."

Keithwood was brought back to his previous troubles. He calmed his stomach before focusing on how to ameliorate the current situation. "Thus, we have prepared some things in advance. We will be breaking the tasks among several groups. Milord, Prince Abel, Miss Tiona, and Miss Liora, and those from the SEEC program..."

These groups were quickly decided upon. Sion's team would be preparing the fruits by removing the stems from the scarletmoon strawberries and cutting them. It was simple work. Tiona seemed to be particular about the way things were cut, and Sion was quite accustomed to a sword. As for Liora...she had once lived in the woods, so Keithwood had concluded it would probably be fine. While Keithwood was confident that Abel wouldn't do anything strange, putting him in the same group as Mia would most likely cause her to lose control. Thus, he was put here. While it would be dangerous to have the children using knives, removing the stems could be done by hand, so there likely wouldn't be any issues. This battle formation was incredibly well considered.

"Next is those who will be whipping the cream and mixing in

sugar. That will be Princess Miabel, the daughter of Duke Yellowmoon, and Karon from the SEEC program. Miss Lynsha will be your group leader."

Keithwood continued to assign groups that would help keep away any troubles. As Citrina was used to mixing poisons, those skills should make her perfectly suited for making whipped cream. Probably... No, certainly! Bel would also most likely follow her friend's orders faithfully. From the SEEC program, he chose Karon, who was a bit of a troublemaker. Since Lynsha was used to dealing with such boys, Keithwood had absolute faith in her.

"Finally is the group who will be baking the bread. This will include Miss Rafina, Princess Mia, Princess Rania, and Miss Chloe. Miss Anne will also be there to support you, and your group leader will be Princess Rania's attendant..." He assigned some manpower to the group. He continued to tell himself that it would all be fine over and over again in his head. "Miss Monica and I will be overseeing all groups to make sure no issues arise. If something occurs, please tell us as soon as— Hm?"

Yes, it was then that a hand shot itself in the air. It was none other than one marked for special consideration and attention, Mia Luna Tearmoon.

"What is it, Princess Mia?"

"Aren't quite a few of us assigned to bread making? I'm quite used to the task, so why don't I help you facilitate the whole—"

"No, that is all right. I am hoping you will help them make perfectly normal shaped bread. It's quite important to divide our labor efficiently. Yes, efficiently..."

Mia already had experience in bread baking. Princess Rania and Anne would be on her team as well. In any case, Keithwood wanted to put as much of a seal on Mia as he could.

"Hmph... Well, if you insist..."

Sighing his relief at Mia's complacence, Keithwood once again looked around the room to discover another raised hand. "Um... What is it, Miss Bel?"

Bel's face absolutely lit up at the mention of her name. She let out a jubilant "Right!" before timidly beginning to speak. "Wouldn't it be unhealthy to only have sweets?"

"Huh?!" It was a sound argument, albeit from one of the most unexpected sources.

Chapter 16: A Decisive Battle, an Ambush, and Reinforcements

The ambush had come from an unlikely source.

"Wouldn't it be unhealthy to only have sweets?" It was Mia's granddaughter, Miabel, who spoke this truth with the proudest of expressions.

Keithwood gasped. He was at a loss for words. It gave Bel the perfect opportunity to keep blabbering. "I've been told that it's bad to eat desserts without a proper lunch. Shouldn't we make some normal sandwiches too?"

What truth! What absolutely infallible truth! It had even the Libra King Sion turning pale and Keithwood flinching. Meanwhile, hearing such a sound argument from her granddaughter had lit a fire in Mia's chest, igniting her will to teach.

"Hmph... I believe Tatiana has told me something similar." The Great Sage of the Empire had a reputation for her superior memory. She crossed her arms and began to think.

"Oh, no, Princess Mia. There is no need to change the—"

"No. We must provide the children proper meals if we are to take their health into consideration. Once sweets touch the tongue, it is quite hard for anybody to choose to eat something healthy afterward." She was speaking from experience, giving her argument weight. "They may get tired of only eating sweet things as well. I believe this calls for what I originally imagined, the addition of horse-shaped bread." She clapped her hands. "Yes, that would be perfect! If we want to make something healthy, why don't we add mushrooms?" It was an incredibly frightening statement. "I was just working out a way to include mushrooms into horse-shaped bread. Look! Just like the winged horse, there's..."

Mia suddenly pulled out a diagram, and Keithwood rushed to stop her. "Please, Princess Mia. That wouldn't... I-I mean, going mushroom picking *now* would be terribly—"

"Oh, no need to worry about that, Keithwood." Mia put on a

very kind, thoughtful smile. “A mushroom expert like me would be able to find them quite quickly! I’d be able to snatch them right up!”

Snatch up poisonous ones, that is! Poison Mushroom Empress Mia was out of control, and it had Keithwood up in arms. “I absolutely *insist* you bake the bread, Princess Mia...”

Mia’s smile grew even bigger. “There’s no need to worry. My group has members from Perujin. You may be unaware of this, but they’re incredibly skilled at baking.”

I know! Keithwood wanted to scream. *That’s why I made sure I put them with you!* But he swallowed those words.

Mia winked as if closing in for a final blow. “It’s just as you said. It’s important to divide our labor efficiently, no?”

Keithwood never had imagined his earlier words would be turned against him. He gritted his teeth.

“I was actually thinking we should make mushroom bread at first anyway. While I did find myself flirting with the idea of fruit sandwiches for a spell, I believe we should stick to my original plan. We’ll develop the bread even further into being completely three-dimensional, making it into a winged...”

This was the end. At least, Keithwood thought so. Just as he began to accept defeat...he received some unexpected reinforcements.

“My apologies, Miss Rafina.”

“My, Santeri! Whatever is it? Is that...?” Santeri entered the room, leading several other of Rafina’s attendants. They carried baskets with them, and inside were—

“Moons!”

—enough mushrooms to elicit that rapturous sigh from Mia, piled to the height of a mountain. They included not just Belluga mushrooms, but a wide range of varieties.

“I believed it possible that things may take this direction, so I had them prepared. I have all the mushroom varieties currently in season that the forest has to offer. Of course, none among them are poisonous.”

Keithwood was incredibly moved by these reassuring words. He glanced aside to find Monica offering him a slight nod. She must have been the one who requested Santeri’s aid. Keithwood had completely overlooked this. Deeply impressed by her skillful diversion tactic, he had failed to consider things further.

Or perhaps he just wanted to believe that there was nothing more to worry about. In any case, Monica had prepared for this unexpected shift in circumstances. Had mushrooms been mentioned from the beginning, Mia would have absolutely insisted on them. Thus, Monica had kept them a secret until Mia had mentioned them herself.

This was Plan B. While it would have been ideal if things had stopped at just the whipped cream and strawberry sandwiches, this was the next best thing, and Monica had made sure to limit the danger in advance.

These are the skills of a Wind Crow, huh…?

With these emotions came some words floating in the back of his mind. A legendary general of Sunkland had once said, “On the battlefield, the aid of the locals is the strongest of assurances.”

“So this is what ‘The Importance of Local Cooperation’ from the *Book of Earth of Sunkland Battle Tactics* was referring to…” muttered Keithwood. He had never expected to see a theory from his textbooks put into action here.

It was through situations like these that Keithwood trained his skills as a battle tactician he would later be known for.

Chapter 17: Keithwood Fights the Good Fight

Despite Santeri's reinforcements, the plan still needed an overhaul; in addition to their strawberry and whipped cream sandwiches, they now had to make horse-shaped mushroom ones too.

He quickly worked out a new division of personnel. First, he removed Citrina and Bel from the whipped cream group to form a bechamel sauce group led under Monica's instruction. Very tearfully, he also had to change the shape of the bread from perfectly normal to horse-shaped. Now, they would be making horse-shaped fruit sandwiches and horse-shaped mushroom sandwiches. Despite his every effort to suggest that only the mushroom sandwiches be horse-shaped, he was no match for the force of Mia. Plus...

"Hmph. Are there any mushrooms here that could make wings? Something more...wide and floppy. If we had that, then..."

"Princess Mia, are you suggesting that the mushrooms we have at hand are lacking? Is that truly all your love for mushrooms amounts to?" Keithwood stood firmly against the ferocious wave Mia was trying to send his way. It was necessary to prevent the situation from getting any worse, and thus, he stood his ground. "We should make use of the mushrooms here to their full capacity. Is that not what defines mushroom love?!"

Despite questioning to himself what in the moons "mushroom love" could possibly be, he didn't back down. Mia gasped. His impressive argument had left her scowling.

"Mia, I'm incredibly thankful for your help. This is a day for Julius and the children to make amends. However, I want your direct lessons in how to make this new, horse-shaped bread you've thought of."

Rafina had come to his aid! Well...rather than aid, it was more like delaying the issue for another day. Still, he accepted her words

in full with a vigorous nod.

"I absolutely insist you use what we have here today to their fullest," said Keithwood.

Mia made her reply. "I see... I was getting ahead of myself. If I'm not loyal to smaller mushrooms, I can never have loyalty to bigger ones. I need to remain humble." She had been convinced!

Keithwood took a look at her and thought, *Is she really the Great Sage of the Empire?* He was approaching the truth of the Great Sage! But just then...

"Whoa!"

"Ah! I'm sorry!"

...he almost bumped into one of the girls of the SEEC program. She bowed, but he was able to make out the glee on her face. She ran off, and Keithwood shouted, "Please refrain from running too much! Be careful!" before once more turning his thoughts inward. *Princess Mia created that smile...* As someone who came from a similar background, he found the girl's smile almost blindingly bright.

And it wasn't just her. All the children of the SEEC program—whether they be picking stems, picking mushroom caps, kneading bread, mixing whipped cream, or just incredibly excited about Mia's diagram for a new kind of horse-shaped bread—were grinning ear to ear. Some had flour on their noses or stains on their shirts, but within those failures was the innocence that made them kids. If sagacity is not what brought innocent smiles to these weak, oppressed, and mistrustful children, then just what could it be?

While Princess Mia tends to let cooking consume her to the point of verbal slips, she is nonetheless the Great Sage of the Empire. How unjust it was for me to question her achievements just for her lack in cooking skills. It took a lot of internal reflection to completely wipe out the doubt that had begun to burgeon in his chest.

"Rina, don't you think we need to add a secret ingredient to the sauce for the mushroom sandwiches?"

"Rina's also heard that is an important part of cooking. How about we add this red spice?"

"This one? How much?"

"Hm... Well, if we add too little, no one will be able to taste it. Let's add a larger amount so that doesn't happen."

The moment this frightening conversation made its way to Keithwood's ears, he was out of his mind and back to reality. He

rushed to approach them when he saw Monica heading their way.

"Miss Citrina, I would like to offer my advice. When poisoning someone, do you ever make sure to leave a large amount so your victim will notice?"

Citrina tilted her head, then shook it. "No, Rina would not..."

"Yes, exactly. It is important to make sure your victim takes the poison without noticing its presence. The 'secret' in 'secret ingredient' is literal, I believe. Would that be an appropriate amount considering that fact?"

Citrina crossed her arms and took a second to think. "So...people can't realize what the secret ingredient is. That means adding a lot isn't good?"

Monica gave a silent nod.

Citrina accepted her words with a smile. "Bel! Rina thinks we shouldn't add too much of that red powder. Maybe half that much? No, a fourth is good. Though it would also be bad if we don't put in enough and it has no effect..."

A fourth? W-Well, I guess that's...uh...fine? I suppose? The fruit sandwiches should turn out sweet, so that should make up for it. Maybe? I-It should be fine. No, it will *be fine!*

While Keithwood did vaguely recall hearing something about how no amount of sweetness can cover spice...he pretended to forget and returned to circling about the kitchen.

Thus, these two vassals' persistent efforts allowed the cooking party to carry onward.

Chapter 18: The Battle Ends...but Life Continues

"Woo-hoo!"

Having overcome tremendous difficulty, it was now time to celebrate. Seeing the lineup of food before them, all who gathered let out a shout of glee. Sitting atop the plates were glorious horse-shaped sandwiches. Halfway through, Keithwood realized that limiting the shape to just the head would be easier to use, and under the guidance of his leadership, what sat before them now was a mix of sandwiches made with original horse-shaped bread and the new horse-*head*-shaped bread.

Incidentally, it was Anne and Mia that led this charge. Taking his inspiration from the truth that people who have nothing to occupy themselves get up to no good, Keithwood assigned Mia the task of making horse-shaped bread to keep her head and hands occupied. Now, it was also due to this fact that Mia was able to regretfully suggest, "Why don't we put some whipped cream on the outside to make them white horses?" resulting in a product quite overly sweet, but...so be it! They were incredibly difficult to eat and left your hands smothered in whipped cream, but at least they were edible.

Thus, some of the bread had been filled with mushrooms and bechamel sauce, and some had been filled with whipped cream and strawberries, creating the finished sandwiches that were now before them. While there was whipped cream dripping out the sides, mushrooms peeking out from the inside, and cream slathered on top of some to make them terribly difficult to eat, they were still complete.

Keithwood felt a flood of emotions as he gazed upon the sandwiches. As they flew through his mind, someone silently came up beside him.

"So, it's finally over," whispered Mia. Her tone was that of a fellow worker relishing in a shared victory. Or rather, her *own*

victory. It was written all over her face, and for a moment, Keithwood was irked, but...it was fine. Now wasn't the time for this. They had created something edible, and Keithwood could ask for no more.

"Yes... Good work today, Princess Mia," he replied. He was clearly exhausted, and he attempted to leave, but...

"My? Where are you off to, Keithwood?"

"Huh?"

"We made all these together, and it's finally time to enjoy! Hurry and take a seat." She said it like it was the most natural thing in the world, and she began to instruct others to do the same.

"Is that truly all right?" nervously asked a vassal from Perujin.

Anne nodded toward her with a smile. "Yes. That's just the type of people milady and her friends are."

Keithwood inwardly nodded at the truth of Anne's words. *Indeed... This table transcends social class, and that is all thanks to Princess Mia's efforts.* Royalty, nobility, vassals, and orphans all sat around a single table. Keithwood felt that this tolerant environment was perfectly suited for the reconciliations that had been this event's purpose.

Princess Mia is truly...

In deep admiration, Keithwood took a seat at the table.

Rafina also watched over the proceedings with admiration. At the beginning of the party, Rafina had felt pressured to say something. While it was possible to leave everything to Mia, as the one who had proposed the event, she had come with the determination to take the lead. However, the children had those feelings vanishing like mist.

Bringing up anything too complicated would only put a damper on things...

The children seemed to have put all hard feelings behind them. Or rather, it might have been more correct to say there was simply no place for such feelings here. The horse-shaped sandwiches filled with fruit and whipped cream were absolutely wonderful. The whipped cream melted in the mouth, and the strawberries had a pleasant acidity that matched it perfectly—not to mention the bread absorbed those flavors beautifully. And more than anything, there was the sense of accomplishment of having made something so tasty themselves. It made it so incredibly...*incredibly* tasty.

Matters of forgiveness no longer felt important. They had no time for chatting as they stuffed their cheeks, and the attitude of, "All that matters is getting to eat tasty food!" had consumed the children...and Mia.

"Ah! How sweet! Covering the top in whipped cream was the right move... Oh, but you have to eat the healthy mushroom sandwiches too, okay, Patty? They're tasty too. Here. Eat this one." Mia presumptuously watched out for Patty...all the while stuffing her face with the fruit sandwiches.

The jubilant atmosphere had calmed Rafina. She looked down at the fruit sandwich in her hand. She had taken a bite, leaving some whipped cream on one of her fingers. She crudely licked it off just like a child would, letting out a sigh as the sweetness hit her tongue.

"It is easy to turn to revenge, but it is a conclusion that comes with bitterness. It is hard to choose a path of reconciliation, but it leads to a sweet future. These sweet horse-shaped sandwiches are just what this party needed. Mia truly is amazing..." happily muttered Rafina. But at the same time, she had begun to daydream.

If I were to bring these on a long ride with Malong...they may lose their shape. I believe this calls for asking Keithwood for some more advice...

Keithwood's battle would continue...perhaps.

That night, Keithwood slipped from Sion's room. He headed for the academy's courtyard, enjoying a drink as he gazed at the moon. Of course, alcohol was not on the table, so he instead sipped on some sunlight apple juice.

"I was certain there would be trouble, but the results were just..." Keithwood recalled the children's innocent smiles, causing him to break into a grin of his own. A sense of fulfillment welled up inside him. "Well, perhaps Princess Mia had planned it to be this way all along."

Their lives at Saint-Noel's was like a dream for the children. However, it was hard for people to accept happiness offered to them suddenly and unexpectedly. It was not difficult to imagine that those children had been betrayed time and time again either.

Rather than believe and be betrayed, it was better to never believe at all. Believing that they could never become happy, they gave up on the task in order to protect what little remained of their

heart. It would be difficult to get children that believed such things to adjust to life at the academy. Keithwood had similarly had a hard time believing it when King Abram had adopted him. He wondered just when it was he had finally been able to open his heart.

"Could Princess Mia...have purposefully crafted the flow of events considering the backgrounds of the SEEC students...?"

Julius's actions could have led to destruction, but Mia had created a wave that instead led to him deepening his bond with his students. Just how much of this had been a part of Mia's calculations...? It was hard to think she predicted all of it, but at the same time, it could hardly be a coincidence...

Keithwood had tried to rack his brains, but he gave up with a sigh and a shake of his head. "Well, in any case, now that it is all over, it does make for a good memory..." Just as things were reaching a comfy conclusion, Keithwood came back to reality. "Wait, wait, wait. No, this was a mess. If I had left her to her own devices, I'm certain we would have all been taken mushroom hunting... I even heard her muttering something like, 'I'm sure we've learned the skills to make our horse-shaped bread life-sized.' That was a close one..."

In an attempt to protect himself, he had sealed these harrowing memories deep inside his chest. But now, they came back to him, and it left him shaking.

"Ah. So this is where you were, Sir Keithwood."

Suddenly, a voice called out to him. He turned around. "Ah, Miss Monica."

It was none other than the lady of the hour. She must have been looking to let off some steam as well, for in her hands was a ceramic mug just like Keithwood's.

"You truly saved me today." He stood up and offered a deferential bow. A young lady like herself was to be treated with proper respect. Having retained his usual composure, Keithwood laid out a handkerchief on the bench he had just been sitting on and invited her to sit down.

"My, thank you." She did just as he gestured. "Today's job was a good one. The children seemed happy. I've never felt so good about an espionage mission." She grinned and leaned her back on the bench to look up at the night sky. "Using information to stop your enemies in their tracks, weaken their forces, and create friction among their members to destroy them from within...

Manipulating information to best benefit your current circumstances was the way of the Wind Crows. However, that's not the way of Miss Mia. She doesn't just eliminate her enemies; she turns them into allies, creating a happy future for everyone. I decided to take a line from her playbook today and it went well. She truly is amazing."

"Yes, but I have you to thank as well. I am glad to have you as my ally." Keithwood raised his glass. "To the reliable and charming lady."

Monica couldn't help but giggle at his affected smile. "Huh? Are you hitting on me?" She said it in the same joking manner as she always did. But this time...

"Hm..." He grinned. "I suppose that wouldn't be so bad either." He gracefully took a knee. "Could I have your hand at a dance soon, miss?"

"...Huh?" Monica's mouth was agape. Having been taken by surprise, a slight color tinted her cheeks.

The calm and collected Keithwood would not stand to be the only one at the butt of a joke. A skilled tactician always regroups for a counterattack.

While a subtle scent of romance filled the air outside, Mia lay asleep in her bed.

"Ugh... I can't eat another bite..."

In her dreams was a life-sized whipped cream and fruit sandwich in the shape of a pegasus.

The next morning, she awoke to record this idea in her journal. "A life-sized fruit sandwich in the shape of the winged horse... Moons do I have good ideas!"

Keithwood's battle had no end.

Part 6: Full Moon Dreams in a Horse-Filled Summer

Prologue: The Respite Is Over! And Mia Loses Her Cheat Codes…Wait, She Loses Them?!

Two months had passed since the creation of the SEEC program, and summer break was right around the corner. Bel happily hummed to herself in Mia's room, munching on the tea cakes before her before breaking out into a smile. "I didn't know the swordsmanship tournament was so intense!" She clasped her fists, waving them in the air so hard her body came with them. It had the air of a troublemaking child, lacking the grace of an imperial princess—*completely* lacking. "Prince Sion is so cool! And so was grandpa… Tee hee! I'm so glad I got to come back to the past, since I got to see something so cool!"

The finale of the tournament was a fight between Sion and Abel. Sion had had his sword honed as if this were a return match to fight for Sunkland's honor, and it was Abel who first fell to a knee in the intense battle.

"Prince Sion really is cool! He's so good with a sword. He's the best!" Having gotten to watch a match between her beloved Libra King and Grandpa Abel, Bel was on cloud nine.

Mia sighed. "It'll be exam season soon, Bel. Have your studies been going well?"

"Huh…?" Bel tilted her head before once again saying, "Huh?!" You see, she had to do a double take.

"Don't act like this is the first you're hearing of it… The exams before summer break are why you once had to stay back at Saint-Noel Academy for the summer."

“O-Of course I know about them! I do, but... Huh? I-I was told to treat going back to the past as a vacation...so Mr. Ludwig had me study a whole bunch in advance...” Bel tilted her head again, as if utterly confused.

Mia put on a wry smile. “If you’ve studied a bunch in advance, then it shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Miss Mia... Do you think you can trick me like that? My ability to see through such unfair deflections is exactly why I can be called the granddaughter of the Great Sage of the Empire!” Bel’s face was tense.

Mia couldn’t help but sigh once again. “No, it’s getting good test scores that proves you’re the Great Sage’s granddaughter! You hear that, Bel?!” Mia stared at Bel in silence. She placed a hand to her heart and let out a long sigh before declaring, “This is the end of your respite!” Her tone was grand. “It ends today, right now!”

This tragic declaration had Bel collapsing to the ground as if it had been lightning and not words that struck her. Just as Mia thought she was about to break into tears, Bel instead lifted her face and said, “I... I think I just heard the voice of Mother Elise...” She put a hand to her chest. “Yes...that’s right. The blood of the Great Sage of the Empire runs in my veins. I am Miabel Luna Tearmoon. I almost forgot that I need to take pride in that fact and fight valiantly!”

Bel had inherited her ability to quickly change directions from her grandmother. Bel lifted a fist into the air to declare her intention to study hard, but Mia was too exhausted to point out the silliness in all this, for Mia’s hopes of good test scores were looking abysmal as well.

Yes, Mia was now sixteen, an age in which in the previous timeline, she could no longer afford the luxury of continuing her studies. She had stopped attending Saint-Noel’s. In other words, her time-traveling advantage had run its course! She could no longer use the knowledge she had gained from the previous timeline as a cheat code to decimate her exams, nor could she pompously help her classmates in her studies.

...Wait, could she ever though? Had she really used her studies from the previous timeline to breeze through her lessons? Had she easily come top of her class with unparalleled test scores?

No. The answer was a definite no.

Mia never had an advantage in her studies in the first place.

From the moment she had entered Saint-Noel Academy, she had no cheat codes from her previous life that could thrust her to the top of the class! Basically, Mia would have to struggle in this round of tests just like she always had. She had no time to be worrying about Bel (which was always the case).

"Ugh... I absolutely cannot afford any bad scores this time. I have to set a good example for the SEEC students...but now that I'm in the senior high division, there's so much stuff to memorize... Wait, this could be my chance! I'll eat a bunch of pancakes with equations written on them. That may be the only way I can make it through this..." As tears began to form in her eyes, Mia picked up her textbooks to head to the dining hall to study when...

"Miss Mia? The SEEC program is going to have a special study session. Will you come with me?" Patty's question lit a light bulb in Mia's mind! A demonic light bulb...

"Ah, the SEEC program. I've heard that Julius is a wonderful teacher." Julius's face came into her vision. He would be sure to teach her as kindly as he taught the children and might give her some more underhanded advice as well. For example, a secret method of easily memorizing information... "Hmph, if I were to casually study alongside the SEEC students...he might teach me as well. What a wonderful opportunity! I'll invite Bel..."

Mia thought it was a wonderful idea, and she went to ask Julius's permission the following day.

It should be noted that Mia's desire to study alongside the SEEC students had originally come as a shock to Julius, but he quickly figured out the thinking behind her request.

Indeed. Princess Mia is going to take the initiative to show the students that even a princess studies hard for her exams.

Once they see that the princess of the Tearmoon Empire and student council president still worked hard to pass her exams, the students will have a hard time skipping out. Rather, it might inspire them to study just as hard.

In that case, I must thoroughly watch over her.

Julius adjusted his glasses and narrowed his eyes. "Understood, Princess. Please show us how diligent you are in your studies."

"Yes... Thank you." Then she began to think again. "But...huh? That glare he had on was quite... Especially mixed with the impact of his glasses... Hm..."

Despite Mia's confusion, the exams quickly approached. Exhausted as they were, Mia and Bel had overcome.

Thus, summer break had come without incident. Or so they thought. But a new problem approached...

Chapter 1: Supple Yet Biting Mia

Having ridden through the rough waters of exams, Mia slouched like a supple jellyfish. That was when she suddenly received a summons from Rafina.

"My, I wonder what it could be." She pulled herself together and sat up straight. While they had become quite close friends as of late, Mia still couldn't let down her guard against the gentle lion.

Yes, at her core, Mia lacked faith. Not in Rafina, but...

"I occasionally err without even noticing! I must stay diligent."

...in herself. Mia was chickenhearted, and thus, was always alert. She never forgot to keep her eyes peeled for any wrong paths she might be unintentionally about to walk down. *That* is what truly made her the Great Sage of the Empire.

Thus, Mia got out of bed and had Anne help her change into her uniform before rushing to the student council room. She was no longer the supple jellyfish; like a dried mushroom brought back to life with water, she had a bite to her. It was with that in her heart that she entered the room to find Rafina waiting for her, Kiryl and Yanna by her side.

"Greetings, Miss Rafina."

"Oh, Mia! I'm glad to see you." Rafina smiled. Mia took a minute to consider the situation. Her conclusion? Rafina was *not* mad at her.

Now able to relax her shoulders, Mia spoke to the children. "Hello, Yanna, Kiryl. How were your exams?"

"I did well!" boasted Yanna. Meanwhile, Kiryl was only able to mutter, "U-Um... I think I did okay..."

Amused by the polar opposite reactions of the siblings, Mia turned to Rafina. "So, what is it you called me here for?"

"Oh, yes... It will soon be summer break. I was wondering what to do with the students of the SEEC program during that time."

"Ah, right. We have yet to think that through," Mia replied.

The majority of Saint-Noel's students would return to their home countries, including Rania who was to perform at the

Thanksharvest Festival. None remained unless they failed their tests or had a similarly dire situation. (Incidentally, there were very few students who had to stay behind over summer break due to poor test scores in the academy's entire history, and one among them was Bel. She had made her mark!)

"In general, I think it would be best to have them return to their parents—or in their case, their orphanages—just as the other students do. They can report back to them what they've experienced here," said Rafina.

Hearing experiences of the Special Elementary Education Course from the students themselves would make it easier for orphanages to send students in the future. Should they continue to expand, they would eventually be able to wipe out every place that could serve as a Chaos Serpent breeding ground.

"But that won't work for these two, would it?" Rafina looked toward Yanna and Kiryl. "I hear they only spent a short time in the orphanage, so I don't think there's much meaning in having them report back. Not to mention..."

"Right. We shouldn't have them return to an orphanage in Ganudos."

Ganudos Port Country held discriminatory views against the Visalians. Rather than return to such a place, it would be better for them to stay on the island of Saint-Noel. However...

Mia let out a "Hmph!" and began to think about none other than her own young grandmother. *It seems Patty has opened up to these two.* Patricia would certainly deny the fact, but they had just as certainly become friends. And from what Mia could tell, Patty had never had a proper friend before. *Rina used to be similar when she had been brainwashed by the Serpents. There's a chance these two could be key in bringing Patty back to the light.*

To be freed of the Serpents, Patricia had to open her heart. For that, Mia was dead set on having them stay by her side. Thus!

Mia cleared her throat. "How would you two like to come back to Tearmoon with me?"

"Huh?" Yanna blinked. Then, she dismissively waved her hand in the air. "Oh, um... Being here is enough for us. Ya don't have to..."

Mia understood how she felt. Saint-Noel Academy was heaven on earth. Here, they never had to worry about food or where to spend the night. They even received clothing. Not to mention that

in summer, the area around the lake was incredibly pleasant.

However, Mia was adamant about having the two come with her, and so she decided to force the issue. “Yanna... I would like you to see as much of the world as you can.”

“As I can?”

“Yes. Before, you were in Ganudos. Living there was hard for you, wasn’t it?” The tattoo carved into her forehead had led to persecution. “However, that was only in the tiny world of Ganudos. This continent is not filled with people who will discriminate against you. There are plenty who will treat you kindly. I’m sure you learned as much here at Saint-Noel’s.” Mia softly looked into Yanna’s eyes, then Kiryl’s, the latter of which fidgeted uncomfortably with a nod. “This continent—this world—has much to offer. There are even countries across the sea. Thus, there is no need to cling to a country where you cannot live peacefully. If you wish, you are free to run away. At least, that’s what I think.”

Mia was speaking from her heart. Yes, you could run away! To anywhere! On horseback, you could go far, far away—far enough that a leg-sprouting guillotine could never follow. It was okay to run!

But to run, you needed to know all about the land. You needed to know foreign countries. With no knowledge of what places had good cuisines, it was impossible to decide where you would run to.

Mia clenched her fist in determination. “Thus, I want you to learn about all sorts of places so that you can run away if you ever need to. You already know of Ganudos and Belluga. Next will be Tearmoon. Then there’s Perujin, Sunkland, Remno... There are many countries in this continent, and I am sure there is one out there that will be easy for you to call your home.” Mia placed her hand on top of Yanna’s head. “Plus, I think Patty would be sad to part with you two. She’ll love having you with her.”

At the end, she mixed in her true thoughts on the matter, which were “Please come for Patty’s sake!” This was the best way to make a convincing argument.

For a moment, all Yanna could do was blink her eyes. She couldn’t make a decision.

“I wanna go to Tearmoon, Yanna!” That’s when Kiryl made the decision for her.

She nodded. “I understand. Um... Thank you.”

“Oho! It’s decided, then!” Mia nodded with a satisfied grin.

Chapter 2: Premonitions of a Lively Journey

"It's great that I will be bringing Yanna and Kiryl with me, but...just where should they stay? Hm..." Mia groaned as she left the student council room. "I don't mind having them in the palace, but... Oho! Maybe it would be best to have them stay with Anne's family. They might benefit from spending time with a warm, loving family. And it's not like I can just suddenly introduce Patty to my father. I'll need time to prepare."

Mia walked down the hallway deep in thought when she was suddenly interrupted by a voice. "Oh, Mia. I was just looking for you."

Mia turned around to find Abel approaching. "My, Abel! What is it?" In a flash, a cute smile made its way onto Mia's face. This was not a move she made consciously; recently, Mia had realized that Abel's presence always naturally drew a smile from her. Warmth would begin to spread from her chest, boiling over into a grin.

Moons, Abel! I think you've gotten even stronger! You're so tall, and your face has gotten so manly...

"Hm? Is something the matter?" asked Abel with a kind grin. The gap between his expression now and his manly face from earlier caused Mia's heart to skip a beat.

"N-No, it's nothing! What do you need?"

"I actually had a favor to ask. Would it be all right if I accompanied you to Tearmoon?"

His sudden proposal had Mia feeling a bit puzzled. "I don't mind at all, though this is quite sudden, isn't it? Did something happen?"

Yes, that was the moment. Mia's brain—or rather, her unparalleled sagacity in matters of love—had found the answer! *A-Abel, d-do you mean to greet my father?!*

The prince charming coming to greet his bride-to-be's father

before asking her hand in marriage was a popular scene...in the world of Elise's romance novels. For the nobility, marriage was a matter deeply tied to politics. From the moment of first meeting to the day of the wedding ceremony, the guardians of the two usually worked out every detail, leaving no room for passionate displays including the words "Please allow me your daughter's hand in marriage!" The moment the two met, that arrangement had already been made with the parents' approval.

However, Mia had realized the following: *Abel's quite brave! Once he's set his heart on something, he never wavers. It's quite possible that he would turn to direct negotiations with my father in order to have me for himself.* And having made that realization, Mia's breaths grew heavy. Huffing and puffing, she put a hand to her chest and took some deep breaths. Then, she asked the question.

"U-Um, Abel? What do you want to come to Tearmoon for?"

"Hm... I think it would be best to have *her* explain."

Abel glanced to his side, causing Mia to suddenly realize he hadn't come alone. While all her thoughts had been focused on Abel, another good look revealed a girl standing behind them. She puffed out her chest and crossed her arms in front of her.

"My, Aima!" Mia swallowed the words, "Just when did you get here?" The look in Aima's eyes was sharper than she had ever seen. "U-Um, is something the matter?"

"It appears an enemy took one over on my brother."

Mia's eyes opened in shock. "Your brother? The wolfmaster...?" In other words, the strongest the Chaos Serpents had to offer. Even Dion Alaia recognized his skills. The news was hard to believe.

"He was wounded after falling into a river. He will be immobile for a short while."

"Plus, it seems like the man who pushed him in was a skilled sailor," added Abel. He gave Mia a meaningful glance.

With that, things fell into place. "A sailor...? Could he be the one that brought Barbara to Saint-Noel Island?"

"We don't know, but he could be. Plus...he's now headed for Tearmoon with the man behind what happened in Sunkland."

"To Tearmoon?"

"Well, to be exact, the river he was headed down runs toward Tearmoon, but...it's best we stay vigilant."

Mia let out a sigh—half in relief, and half in defeat. But then, she quickly broke into a grin. "Thank you, Abel."

“There’s no need to thank me. I simply want to avoid having any regrets. There is nothing more painful than being unable to do anything when someone you care for is in danger.”

Hearing Abel plainly call her someone he cares for had Mia internally squealing.

A-Abel really can be an airhead! He just casually called me someone he cares for! Waaah! This is the best! But also embarrassing! Mia squeezed her cheeks and squirmed.

“It is not only Prince Abel; I will also be attending. In place of my good-for-nothing brother, I shall be responsible for tracking the Serpents.” Aima shook her head in exasperation. “In any case, I look forward to our time together.”

“My, now we have another… This has grown to be quite the group. I am glad to have Abel and Aima with me, however. Oho! This will be quite the journey.”

Thus, those headed for Tearmoon had been decided. In addition to Mia and the others who called the Empire their home, there would be Abel, Aima, Yanna, and Kiryl. Anticipating the lively journey ahead, Mia grinned from ear to ear.

Chapter 3: Which Is Right?

Clip-clop! The way back home to the Tearmoon Empire was a calm one.

Clip-clop! Those relaxed footsteps reverberated through the air.

Clip-clop! The gentle breeze and warm sunlight had Mia squinting atop her horse.

"Oho! This really is the perfect day for a horseback ride," she muttered. Patty sat right in front of her, and to their side was Yanna and Kiryl, similarly sharing a horse. Walking it by the reins was Abel.

In other words, this was a small "Try your hand at horseback riding!" experience. The road that connected Tearmoon and Belluga was known for its safety and was peaceful enough to allow for the children to traverse it on horseback. Thus, Mia had jumped on the chance to offer the kids in the group this new experience.

The scene before them was of perfect serenity. The azure sky above spread on forever with not a single cloud in sight. The light of the sun was gentle and calm...but that was exactly what had put this year's wheat harvest in danger.

It seems we'll be having a poor harvest this year too... Mia's expression suddenly grew cloudy. At the very least, she had heard from Rania that this year's harvest would be similar to the previous. *We've already started to have to eat into our reserves...but if we keep pace with the overseas provisions purchased from Forkroad & Co., Tearmoon should be able to make it through. Though if foreign nations begin to ask for our aid as well...it won't be enough. We can only hope Cyril will bring us results.*

Just as Mia had begun to get lost in her thoughts, she realized Patty was staring at Yanna and Kiryl. "What is it, Patty?"

Patty initially looked shocked, but she quickly shifted gears, slowly shaking her head. "No. It is nothing. But, Miss Mia, what use does this have?"

"'This'...? Do you mean riding horses?"

"Yes." Patty nodded, staring straight into Mia's eyes.

“Use, hm...?”

Mia took a moment to consider her answer. *The right answer probably isn’t that it’s a fun way to exercise... Perhaps I should just be honest.*

Mia’s goal was to free Patty of the Serpents’ influence. For that, it was most convenient for Patty to think she was another of their teachers. In order to get the Serpent out of her, she had to give her a proper and respectable education, but to get her to listen, Mia had to act like a Serpent.

Now, there was an obvious contradiction here that needed to be resolved someday, but for now, Mia didn’t need to worry about that, for there was some overlap between what was important for Mia and what was important for a Chaos Serpent.

Mia grinned. “It’s to make a quick escape. That’s important for a Serpent, isn’t it?”

It was also important for Mia. She wanted to stress the necessity of having the means of escaping at any time and having no qualms in doing so. If anything were to happen to Patty, it would put Mia’s very existence in danger. Of course, she wanted to keep Patty away from any trouble, but if the need ever arose, she also wanted Patty to run away without looking back.

“But...” Patty began to voice a rebuttal, but she was promptly interrupted.

“She’s doing well for a girl who’s never ridden before.” Mia turned her head to find that Abel had brought his horse closer.

“She is, isn’t she? Oho! This reminds me of the first time we went riding.” Mia glanced over at Yanna and Kiryl, who were atop the horse Abel was leading. They both wore joyful grins.

Abel watching over them is exactly why they’re able to have so much fun. He really is so kind! Ah... This has me imagining our future as husband and wife! Oho! Oho ho ho!

She would put *their* children on a horse and lead it right alongside Abel. Then, they’d laugh together as a whole family. These visions of a happy future proved that Mia’s lovey-dovey romance brain was in full swing today.

“Hm? Is something the matter?” Abel gave her a worried glance. Mia felt like she was going to get lost in that kind gaze.

“O-Oho! No, nothing at all.” She deflected with a smile and averted her eyes. “Th-This really is a pleasant ride. I should have expected nothing less from Keilai, the greatest moonhare on the

continent." Mia petted the neck of the horse in front of her. His glossy coat had Mia breathing out a sigh of admiration. "Thank you, Aima."

Mia looked out in front of her, where Aima was riding Dongfeng. Her ears twitched at Mia's words, and she quickly brought her horse over to walk alongside Mia's.

"Ha! Isn't he? My beloved Keilai is quite the steed," she puffed out her chest proudly.

Yes, you read that right. Mia was currently riding Keilai, the pride of the Fire Clan. His light footsteps created a rhythm that could improve the mood of any rider. Mia was a mount-meister who had ridden countless horses, and she nodded in agreement. "He's excellent. I understand why you're so proud of him."

Mia was never stingy when it came to showering fine steeds with praise, for horses were all she could rely on when things really came down to it—they were her final trump card. No matter how cautious she was, people were prone to make mistakes, which could easily send a guillotine chasing after her. She never forgot to view her actions with proper suspicion, for even the most vigilant cannot avoid mishaps.

Thus, Mia wanted to maintain her lifeline. She always had to show horses respect.

"Thank you for letting me ride your beloved horse, Aima."

"It is nothing. You are a dear friend, Princess Mia, and it is only natural to want to share your best steeds with your friends. There are no grounds for thanks... Hm?" Aima suddenly lifted her head and squinted her eyes. A single wolf made its way down the road toward her. "What is it, Hasuki?"

The wolf looked up to her and sniffled.

"It seems something's headed our way," said Abel. With that, Mia also trained her eyes ahead. There, she found a group approaching. There were about twenty men on horseback, the lead carrying a flag.

"That's...Tearmoon's flag." Mia didn't know quite what to think of the situation, but as she racked her brains, the group stepped aside, alighted from their horses, and took to a knee. Mia strolled through, cheerfully waving her hand the whole way.

Yes, while it was quite easy to forget given Mia's usual appearance and actions, she was in fact the princess of the Tearmoon Empire, the exact person all these knights had pledged

loyalty to. Thus, she didn't find the scene to be anything unusual, but...

"Hm?" Patty didn't seem to think that way. While seeing knights wait on them had clearly put Yanna and Kiryl on edge as well, that should pale in comparison to the surprise Patty must have felt, for she didn't know that Mia was a real princess!

Oh, this might have been a mistake. Let's see... What can I do to fix this? Huh? Wait a second.

Just as those thoughts passed through Mia's mind, a familiar young knight appeared before her. His aureate armor looked expensive beyond belief, and he removed his helmet to reveal a magnificent head of silvery blond hair that appeared to glitter. His face brought Mia back to her childhood.

My, how nostalgic! I wonder just how long it's been since we last met. I don't think I've seen him since we visited my mother's grave...

The knight lifted his head and looked straight into Mia's eyes. He narrowed his own into a friendly grin before immediately shifting into a somewhat enthusiastic stare trained just behind Mia. With a slight growl, Abel rushed forward to put himself between Mia and the knight, glaring him down.

"Oh, Abel. There's nothing to worry about. He's my..."

"Hmph. That man seems to have taken an interest in Keilai. He is sending him quite the passionate gaze..." muttered Aima, bringing her horse backward to put herself between Keilai and the knight, glaring him down just as Abel was.

Seeing Aima and Abel's reaction, Patty looked up to Mia in question.

Chapter 4: Entrusted to the Right Hand I

It was only a short while after their encounter with the band of Tearmoon knights that the group arrived in Lunatear. Usually, the return of a princess was a great event for the whole country, but ever since Mia started attending Saint-Noel Academy, she made sure the event was as small and simple as possible. For one thing, it would be terribly expensive to put on a huge parade every summer and winter when she returned from the academy. It would run the country's coffers dry. Her return in winter's proximity to her birthday festival only made that burden heavier.

From Mia's perspective, every grand reception of her arrival only brought the guillotine closer. It was as if an army of Li'l Guils were there to greet her instead. Thus, shortly before her return, she would relocate herself to a simple carriage and sneak her way home. Having once infiltrated the Kingdom of Remno dressed as a band of merchants, sneaking into her own country was a piece of cake.

"We're in the capital...?" Patty goggled at the scene outside the carriage.

Mia flashed her a grin. "Yes, we are. Have you never been here before?"

"I haven't. I was always in the Clausius domain..."

"I see. In that case, I'll have to show you around. There should be plenty of chances to tour around the capital this summer... Ah! The lively area we're in now is the Newmoon District."

Thanks to the measures implemented by Ludwig, the Newmoon District was just as bustling as the rest of the capital—or rather, its new growth had filled it with a passion that superseded that found anywhere else in Lunatear. Even now, a group of carriages assumedly belonging to merchants had entered, and the faces of the townspeople overflowed with glee and life. It was an important center for Mia's base of support.

“The Newmoon District...?” Patty tilted her head, bringing Mia to a sudden realization. *Ah, that’s right. The Newmoon District might not have existed in the time Patty came from.*

Mia knew next to nothing about the history of Lunatear, the creation of the Newmoon District, or how it had become the slums. Yup. She was absolutely ignorant of the history this town had seen and how it came to be what she saw now.

Moons, I messed up! So this *is why it’s important to study history! You need it for cases like this.* She had found a new appreciation for her studies. While it was doubtful how often “cases like this” would really occur, she was right about the importance of history, so we can just overlook that fact.

Anyway, just as Mia was about to try to cover for her mistakes, a new voice made its way into the conversation. “Wow, Patty! We’re in the capital!” exclaimed Kiryl.

Patty looked back at him with the slightest hint of a smile. “Yup. It’s my first time here too.” She then looked at Yanna. “Is this also what Ganudos is like?”

“Nope, Ganudos is a whole lot smaller. But wow! Lunatear is huge!” Yanna gazed at the scenery outside in complete awe. “It’s just as you said, Miss Mia. The world really is big.”

Mia could only sigh at the relief of having avoided Patty’s suspicions. *I was right to bring them here!*

After another short while of making their way through the city, a single house came into view. “Do you see it?” Mia asked. Outside it stood a middle-aged couple and their children—Anne’s parents and siblings. Anne stepped out from the carriage first to greet her parents, followed by a short exchange of greetings with Mia. Mia then turned toward the children. “You will be staying here for a while. This house belongs to Anne, the person I trust most.”

Mia had already talked things through with Anne shortly before they had left Saint-Noel. “Anne, I want you to return to your family’s home for a while.”

“I appreciate your consideration, milady. However...”

Mia interrupted her with a raised hand. “I apologize if I gave you the wrong idea. This isn’t something I’m doing for your sake, but a favor I’m asking of you.”

“A favor...?”

“Yes. I’d like your family to watch over Patty for a short while.”

Anne simply blinked her eyes in surprise. Mia continued with a nod. "Just between you and me, Patty is actually quite important. I'm still not certain of her identity, so I can't share that with you, but...her circumstances are similar to Bel's, I believe."

"Then, she is also related to...?"

"I believe she may be. It is why I strongly want to free her from the Serpents' pull. But in order for my words to reach her, I need to pretend to be a Serpent. I want someone who understands all this to be by her side."

Those were Mia's true feelings on the matter. Patty's past was still mostly a mystery. However, if Patty was the origin of the nightmare Mia had had, and if that nightmare was more than just a dream... *It's frightening to even consider the possibility that a world where Rina and the rest of the Yellowmoons are my enemies could become reality...*

Were things that she never dreamed of histories that still could come to fruition, or histories that never existed at all? For example, a dream where Mia flew through the skies on the legendary winged horse could not be a fragment of lost memories, for such a thing was impossible. In other words, the worlds seen in dreams rooted in fragments of memory were "worlds that had a high probability of existing but had already lost that possibility." While Mia was glad this possibility was now gone, the fact that such a world had "a high probability of existing" was a problem, for that meant that similar worlds could still exist. While it was now impossible for her to be poisoned with a cookie, there was still a possibility that she would be poisoned with mushroom stew instead.

I wonder how big that possibility is... I do remember hearing that Patty was acquainted with Duke Yellowmoon. How frightening! I better make sure I treat her carefully...

Mia crossed her arms and continued. "Of course, I plan to speak with my father to eventually have her moved to the Whitemoon Palace. But until then, I would like your family to watch over her."

Anne gave a silent nod. "Understood. I will do whatever it takes, even if it costs me my life."

"Oh, um... Don't take it that far, okay? You don't have to take this so seriously..."

The strength of Anne's devotion had left Mia in a slight state of panic.

Thus, just as had been discussed, Patty, Yanna, and Kiryl were put in the care of the Littsteins. Mia had expected Patty to resist, but she unexpectedly followed right along.

While Bel would think nothing of it, I was sure Patty would be against staying in the home of a commoner... While a bit confused, Mia headed home to the Whitemoon Palace. *Okay, so... Just how can I explain this to father...?*

Chapter 5: Mia-Papa's Vague Recollection

"I've returned, father."

We now find ourselves in the audience chamber of the Whitemoon Palace. After leaving the Littstein household, the rest of the group—consisting of Mia, Abel, Miabel, Citrina, Aima, and Lynsha—headed straight for the palace. Having received Mia's greeting, Matthias gave a dignified nod and exclaimed, "Welcome home, my sweet, sweet Mia!" His deep love for his daughter overflowed from his lips.

"F-Father..."

Matthias deftly ignored his daughter's protest and turned his eyes on...Bel! "It's been a long time, Miss Bel. I hope you have been well."

Bel, officially recognized by the emperor as Mia's de facto sister, nodded happily. "I have humbly received your kind words, Your Majesty." For some reason, she put on a formal expression and said something rather intelligent-sounding (for her).

It set Matthias into a fit of laughter. "There is no need for such formality. I hear that Mia treats you as a sister, and in which case, you are a daughter to me. Please call me 'papa.'"

"Father...please refrain from spouting words that are bound to create misunderstandings..." Despite her quipping, Mia had come to a resolution. *If father were to find out that Bel is my granddaughter—I suppose that makes her his great-granddaughter—there'd be no controlling him! He'd smother her in all sorts of attention! Wait, wouldn't that mean he'd cling to me less? That might actually be good for me...* While Mia was preoccupied with such thoughts, the conversation continued.

The next person Matthias laid eyes on was Abel. "You have come a long way, Remno prince. I welcome you." Despite those words, Matthias glared at him, the words "You can't have my daughter just yet!" communicated through his gaze.

Faced with such vigor, Abel lowered his head and quietly said, “I am very pleased to be here, Your Majesty.”

After greetings had been exchanged, Abel decided to remain in the Whitemoon Palace. Bel—and for some reason, Citrina—decided to stay in a room together in the palace as well. While the Yellowmoons had a villa in Lunatear, Citrina showed no intentions whatsoever of staying there. Instead, she was ready to enjoy summer break with her best friend as much as she could.

Leaving that all aside, that night, Mia shared dinner with her father for the first time in a while. After thoroughly enjoying the cooking of the palace’s head chef, she decided now was the time to talk about Patty.

“By the way, father, about Grandmother Patricia...”

“Hm?”

Before bringing Patty up, there was something Mia first wanted to ask about. Of course, that was none other than her Grandmother Patricia. “What kind of person was she?”

“It’s rare for you to ask about my mother. Are you sure you want to listen? She is from the Cursed House Clausius.”

Mia couldn’t help but groan. Her fear of that curse was the very reason she had barely heard about her grandmother during her childhood.

“Ha! Well, my mother treated me so kindly the word ‘cursed’ could hardly be used to describe her. Thinking back, she quite spoiled me during my childhood.”

Those unexpected words had Mia’s mind going blank. *Patty* spoiled *her son?* This didn’t align with her perpetual expressionlessness. *That doesn’t really sound like her...*

“But, oho! It’s been such a long time since I last thought about all this! You see, despite all her spoiling, I was quite rebellious. I was against marrying the woman she chose as my wife—your mother, Addie, that is. I had yet to meet her, and I was completely against the idea.”

“Moons! *You* were? That’s quite hard to believe.” The only version of her father that she knew was the one that was madly in love with her mother.

“Since my mother had been the one to decide, I found it hard to accept. Even before then, I had been strictly forbidden from playing around with any woman. I believe that was one of the reasons I was

so rebellious, but my mother was oddly panicked about it all. No, didn't she seem as if she didn't care at all? She was incredibly cold...or was that a dream?" Matthias was puzzled. "No, wasn't I the one who found Addie? No..."

Her father's condition told Mia something: *Could his memories be wavering? Could changes in the current Patty be affecting his memories? It seems like they have yet to solidify...*

If Mia's unskillful meddling led to her parents never having met, Mia herself would cease to exist. How frightening.

Matthias turned his scowl into a wry grin. "How troubling. I seem to be growing a bit senile. In any case, the moment I laid eyes on Addie, I fell in love," he said, scratching his own cheek out of embarrassment. "Right then and there, I was thankful for my mother from the bottom of my heart."

"Because she had introduced you to mother?"

"Yes, that as well. But more importantly, for forbidding me from playing around with any other women. Thanks to that, I was able to make my most beloved my only. In my eyes, there are none who are above her, nor any below. She was the only one I showed my love to, and the one who had it all to herself." His smile grew kind. "The one exception of course, is you, Mia—but if both you and Addie were drowning, I would without a doubt save Addie over you."

Emperor Matthias Luna Tearmoon was a man who could declare such a thing with pride. He was a man who brimmed with love for his wife, his pure (pure?) heart set only on her. However, even he now grimaced. "Though...I do feel quite conflicted. I always rebelled against her, but in the end, she was always right. I was simply too embarrassed to be honest with her. Before I could fully amend our relationship or apologize, she had passed away. It is something I still regret."

Hearing all this, Mia couldn't help but think, *If his memories are vague...that must mean that Patty's existence here is causing the past itself to waver...* There was something else she was hung up on. *Was Patty ever freed from the Serpents?* At the very least, if she was showering her son in love like her father claims, that wasn't very Serpent-like...

"And what was your father like?"

"My father? Hm... He was quite the gloomy man. Still, he loved and treasured my mother." Matthias giggled to himself as if

recalling a fond memory. “This is a secret between you and me. There’s something my father once told me. He said that when he was young, he believed this world was transient, and that his life could end at any instant...but when he met my mother, he was saved.”

“He thought he might die at any moment?”

“Ha ha! He was certainly something, wasn’t he? Well, it may be thanks to him that there’s only ever one person in my heart.”

Mia watched her father as he chuckled away, all the while unable to help but think that the previous emperor was without a doubt the sort of emperor the first had hoped would follow his rule. *That must mean that it was my grandmother—Patty—who ended the curse of the first emperor.*

The first emperor would want progeny who hated the world and wished for destruction. Patty had saved the previous emperor from such thoughts, preventing that despair from being passed to her child.

That should mean it’s safe to assume that my actions can save her from the Serpents. Hmph... Mia scowled with a groan.

Chapter 6: The Bud Sprouts

"Why bring this up so suddenly, Mia? It's rare for you to want to hear about my mother."

Her father's disbelief had left Mia flustered, but she quickly followed it up with, "O-Oh, yes! That's right! I, um...have someone I wish to introduce you to, father," Mia jumped on the opportunity. She had been racking her brains trying to figure out just how she should broach the subject of Patty. Now that an opportunity had come to her, she wasn't going to let it get away. Riding these sorts of waves was just how Mia did things. Her brain now thoroughly nourished with a meal, she was able to get her thoughts in order. "Just like Bel, she and I share many similarities."

First, she told her father what she believed would get him most interested.

"Oho! I am glad to hear there are more girls who could be your sisters out there," he joked.

"Yes. However, her name just happens to be Patricia."

"Patricia... The same name as my mother."

"Exactly. She looks an awful lot like me, and with that name, I knew it would bring back memories of Grandmother Patricia for you." Mia was trying to manipulate her father's perception of Patty. If he ever got close to realizing the truth, this excuse should leave him with a satisfying explanation for their similarities.

"Oho! I'm not so simple a man." Matthias seemed to think Mia's words were a joke, which worked out perfectly all right for Mia. It was simply enough for him to remember Mia's words any time he started to see a hint of his mother in Patty. When faced with the unlikely, people were prone to not think any further if a believable answer had already been made apparent to them.

Hmph. I think this should be enough to allow Patty into the palace. I'm glad things went so smoothly.

Basking in this satisfaction, their dinner party reached its end.

Tired from her journey, Mia got a good night's sleep, and the

next day, a certain young civil official made his way to her room.

"I am deeply pleased to see you had a safe journey, Your Highness," the man said, kneeling on the floor beside her. Mia had the utmost faith in his glasses—ahem, the man himself, Ludwig Hewitt.

"Ah, Ludwig. It feels like it's been quite a while since we last met." Mia flashed him a kind smile. "There's no need to act so formally. Is something the matter?"

It was rare to see Ludwig so uptight, and it had Mia giggling.

"Actually...we have received word from Princess Arshia at Saint Mia Academy."

"From Princess Arshia, you say?"

While Mia wondered just what the message could be, Ludwig lifted his head and cleared his throat. "Together with Cyril Rudolvon, she has succeeded in discovering a variety of grain resistant to the cold."

When he had first heard that news, even Ludwig had collapsed into his chair. Balthazar, who had happened to be with him, had also lost the strength to stand. That alone had been shocking enough. However...

"Additionally, it appears to have been discovered in Gildan Outland County."

Once Ludwig had learned of this fact, various memories began to twirl around his head. During the summer when they had visited Ganudos, Mia had suddenly insisted on visiting that very territory. Not even Ludwig had any idea that visit would bear these fruits.

Being in Saint-Noel, it was impossible for Mia to know how busy Ludwig had been recently. To keep discord from taking route in the Empire, he made meticulous calculations and adjustments in the wheat reserves being circulated within the country. He had to negotiate with both Forkroad & Co. and Perujin, sometimes even having to answer to requests for aid that had made their way from other nations. Even his own allies would raise voices of doubt to him, wondering if Mia's course of action was the right one as they watched their stockpile slowly dwindle.

Ludwig, himself, believed in Mia. Should lack of provisions lead to war with those abroad, the losses would be even greater. There was nothing to be gained in razing fields; there was only to be lost. Thus, relinquishing their store of foodstuffs to countries which asked for their aid had to be the right path...and yet, even Ludwig

had begun to feel uneasy.

It was among those very circumstances that a new factor entered the mix—the discovery of a cold-resistant wheat. Of course, that had been nothing but a discovery, and it could not completely resolve their situation. Still, that boon was immeasurable. Just knowing that a cold-resistant wheat could soon be in their hands was enough to alleviate their fears, for they no longer had to worry about poor harvests and famine in the coming years.

"Not to mention that the whole of Gildan Outland County has put effort into cultivating the crop, allowing them to plant quite a number this season."

Cyril and Arshia had thoroughly examined the wheat fields of the county, and with the help of the outcount himself, succeeded in finding varieties particularly resistant to the cold, creating seeds, and sowing it in place of existing wheat. In other words, they were doing all they could to spread the crop as much as possible based on the conviction that the cold would continue into the next year, making it impossible to grow the wheat varieties that were already available. It was a measure based on complete belief in Mia's predictions. Outcount Gildan, Cyril Rudolvon, and Arshia Tafrif Perujin were a group formed by the sharp eye of Ludwig's very master, and they combined every ounce of their power to overcome imminent peril—it was a scene that came together so beautifully that all Ludwig could do was shudder, and that was only more so the case given Mia's calm attitude when faced with this great accomplishment.

"Oho! I knew Cyril would show us some results," she said with a grin. "By the way, Ludwig, I had something to discuss with you. Do you have the time for a proper chat?" Now, her grin seemed to be suggesting something much more.

Chapter 7: Entrusted to the Right Hand II—Patty's Secret

We now slightly turn back the clock. After Mia had left, there was a bit of an incident at the Littstein household.

"This way." Obediently following the directions of the bespectacled Elise, Patty and the others stepped inside. It was immeasurably smaller than the estate of a noble—especially that of House Clausius—but equally immeasurably greater in warmth.

This…is normal. It's nothing, Patty told herself. *This is a normal home. A boring house of a commoner.* She let out a small sigh, doing all she could to restrain the wavering emotions in her chest.

Patricia Clausius had not been born a noble. She had spent her youngest days as a commoner alongside her brother and mother, and had only gained the noble name of Clausius at the age of seven…shortly after her mother's passing. It was only then that she learned that she had the blood of an eminent noble, Marquess Clausius, running through her veins. The family took in her and her brother as heirs.

Young as she was, there was no resisting this decision. When her brother fell ill, it was only House Clausius that could possibly offer her hopes of a remedy. In all senses of the word, she had no other choice.

Thus, she became the marquess's daughter. While her circumstances were similar to Julius's, her treatment was much harsher—the duty asked of her was to learn the wiles of the Serpents to one day drive her future husband to the depths of despair. It was what the first emperor had wished for in his descendants—hate for the world, a want to destroy, and the ability to curse every corner of the continent. It was the duty and sole purpose of the Clausius family to remind the crown of this fact should they ever forget. As empress, she was to deprive the emperor

of all hope, cursing the world in doing so. Patricia's job was to dedicate her whole life to that task.

It was for that reason she was thoroughly instructed not only in the ways of a noblewoman, but also of the Chaos Serpents. However...that was no proper way for a person to live. Refusing such a role was only natural. It made more sense to simply run. But she couldn't. Her only family left in this world was her brother, and her now deceased mother had asked her to protect him. To save his life, she had to stay.

And so, she learned how to calmly deceive and easily kill. She was to remain expressionless in these tasks, and thus, she gradually lost the ability to smile. No longer capable of fury or tears, she simply lived faithfully by the Serpents' teachings, all in the hopes of saving her dear brother Hannes. Using the secrets of the Serpents, she would find a way to heal her brother's incurable ailment.

Thus, to keep her heart from realizing her own pain, she did everything she could to freeze it over. *I'm all right. This can't shake me. This is all for Hannes...*

She softly grabbed at her collar and made her way deeper into the house. That's when she passed the dining table.

"I'm sure you're all quite hungry. This is all we've got, but eat away to your hearts' content!"

The meal before them had Patty's eyes go wide. It was a traditional Tearmoon meal beloved since the days of old. Patty's mom had always made it for her. It was nostalgic, full of happiness and love. That's why...

"Mom..."

...Patty failed to keep that word inside her.

It's been such a long time since I've been able to eat mom's cooking!

Anne looked at the dish before them with a smile. It was mondklosse, a dish consisting of mashed potatoes rolled into dumplings floating in a soup of meat jerky. The flavor of the meat combined with the softness of the dumplings made for an excellent dish, and it was one Anne's mother was particularly adept at cooking.

I've always loved how the meat soaks up the soup...

Thinking it was a dish that would surely make the kids happy, Anne looked toward the children. Kiryl was happily stuffing his cheeks with the dumplings, and while Yanna appeared quite

nervous, she held a spoon in her hands. Anne's siblings watched over the two with the utmost spirit and devotion. Even John, the troublemaker, was teaching Kiryl tricks to make the dish even tastier, and Emelia, always diligent, was chatting with Yanna.

They were all just children, and now look at them. They've all grown up.

Just as that thought flitted through Anne's mind, she turned to the person sitting next to Yanna and froze. Kiryl and Yanna followed in her footsteps, for Patty—the ever expressionless Patty—was crying. Her eyes were open as wide as can be, countless drops falling down her young cheeks.

"H-Huh? Miss Patty...? What's wrong? Does it taste bad? You don't have to force yourself..." Panicked, Anne brought a handkerchief to her face.

But all Patty could do was shake her head. "I want...my mom..."

While she managed to choke out that wish, there was nothing Anne could do to make it come true. However!

"My apologies..." Those words were but a whisper, but once Anne had spoken them, she took Patty into her arms believing that if Mia were here, this was certainly the action she would take.

Patty was still. But soon, she clung to Anne's clothes, and in no time at all, muffled sobs escaped her. Anne looked up to find her mother. She silently nodded. Driven by her approval, Anne once more apologized. Then, she rubbed Patty's back with her palm in an attempt to soothe her in any way she could offer.

Chapter 8: An Impurity Makes Its Way in…

"Something to discuss with me…? Is it the mysterious phenomenon you described in your recent letter?" asked Ludwig, adjusting his glasses.

Mia had already told him about Bel. Future Ludwig apparently already knew her true identity, and thus, Mia had no qualms about telling him everything, and with the uncertainty that was Patty in the mix, Mia felt like she had no other option.

Bel had said that no one ever mentioned Patty in the future she had come from. However, it was unclear whether that was simply to make it so Bel had no knowledge of Patty when she came to the past, or whether Patty had truly never time traveled into the future in the timeline Bel had come from. With that unknown, turning to Ludwig was the best option.

Though it wasn't like that was actually Mia's thought process. Far from it.

It would be absurd for me to hide all this information and struggle by myself! Quite a few people apparently know about Bel in the future, so there's no advantage in keeping Patty a secret. Yup, making use of the brains I have available to me is my only option! That was how Mia had reached this same conclusion.

However, despite her resolve, she had yet to inform Ludwig about Patricia. The risks Patty posed for Mia were simply too big. Should Patty be bewitched by Serpent ways, Mia's whole existence could be done away with. After all the efforts Mia had made since she first traveled back from the guillotine, she wasn't about to put it all to waste. She wanted to avoid disappearing at all costs.

I have to be more careful about what information I reveal about Patty than I do with Bel.

Thinking that, Mia crossed her arms and outlined her thoughts to Ludwig. "Of course I would like to discuss Bel as well, but there's more than that. To be completely honest, the situation has grown so

complicated that even I am at a bit of a loss as to what to do. Thus, I wanted to hear your opinions on the matter."

"It has stumped even you, Your Highness...?" Ludwig gulped nervously. Behind his glasses, doubt began to fill his eyes.

"Yes. And depending on the particulars of our situation, something even your future self could never have predicted might be occurring." Mia remained silent. According to Bel, she had never heard mention of Patty from Ludwig in the future. It was possible that they were purposefully hiding that information, but...

Hiding it would be fine. If future Ludwig thought there was a need to keep it concealed, I'm sure he calculated accordingly.

What if this wasn't part of his calculations? The appearance of Patty never being accounted for would be the worst-case scenario. When you see what you believe to be a guillotine in the distance and prepare accordingly, you can simply laugh it off if it turns out you were incorrect. However, if you believe it not to be a guillotine and let your guard down, there's nothing to laugh about when a guillotine shows its face. Mia lived by the philosophy that you should think any mysterious thing that appears to you is a guillotine, for always being prepared for the worst scenario was the number one strategy of the chickenhearted.

"Thus, I would like to borrow your wisdom. You are the wisest I know, and I trust you, Ludwig." Mia grinned.

Ludwig took a moment to think before beginning to speak. "My apologies, Your Highness. In that case...would it be possible to hear about this issue on a later date?" His expression was stern.

"Huh? Well, I suppose I don't mind..." Ludwig's unexpected reaction had thrown Mia for a bit of a loop.

But two days later, Ludwig had once again appeared before her with an understanding smile. Seeing the man standing behind him, Mia had also come to an understanding.

"As it appeared that what you wished to share with me was rather abstruse, I took it upon my liberty to enlist some help. Unlike the world that Miss Bel came from, we are currently able to borrow the best brains the continent has to offer." Ludwig glanced at the man behind him. As chancellor, Ludwig had been able to form theories on Bel's time travel. But if there were to be a mind that could supersede his, there was only one man—Ludwig's teacher and Wandering Wiseman.

"It has been a while, Galv," said Mia with a smile.

Saint Mia Academy's headmaster, Galvanus Arminios, responded with a bowed head. Thus, Mia had gathered the best minds the times had to offer—the true brains behind the Great Sage of the Empire, the Wandering Wiseman Galv, and the Great Sage of the Empire herself, Mia Luna Tearmoon (who certainly should have not been included in that list).

Despite this impurity, the Big Brains Brigade took their shot at tackling the elusive mystery of time travel.

Chapter 9: Cause, Effect, and…

"It is humbling to be before you, Your Highness." He bowed deeply. "I have been told you have some words of great interest."

"Well, I am not certain the interest is 'great,' but my guess is it will be outside of what you can find even in fairy tales. Oh! I'll go call for Bel." Mia looked around herself to realize her right hand was missing. "Hmph. Now that I'm sure they've had proper time to rest at the Littsteins, I suppose I should call Patty, Yanna, and Kiryl soon as well…" muttered Mia to herself before calling over her attendant. Having heard Mia's request, the older woman promptly made her way for Bel, who was currently playing around with Citrina. (Yes, *playing*, for she had finished her exams and had already entered summer break mode. The Princess's Respite had returned!)

"Greetings, Miss Mia." After a short while, Bel entered the room. Ludwig glanced at her and groaned.

"I do not mean to doubt you, Your Highness. However…" Ludwig walked up to Bel and gave her a thorough look down. "I simply wish to confirm things for myself, Miss Bel. Would you allow me to examine your neck?"

"Huh? Well, okay. Go ahead." Bel lifted her hair and tilted her neck to move it out of the way. There was not so much a scratch on her delicate nape, much less the mark of an arrow.

"Indeed, there is no sign of any wounds. Thank you." Having finished his examination, Ludwig retreated a step. After apologizing with a bow, he folded his arms with a scowl. "The wound she had suffered was certainly fatal, not to mention her transformation into disappearing light. It truly does seem some greater power was at work…"

Galv clapped the frowning Ludwig on the shoulder. "Hah, my dear Ludwig! How young you still are. Just a look upon her face should tell you all you need to know!" Galv turned to Bel with a grin. "She certainly shares the blood of Her Highness Mia."

He had made his declaration! No truth could escape the eyes of

this wiseman. His perception was acute in every sense.

...But back in the forest, hadn't he...? Well, never mind that!

"I do hope to hear exactly what this situation is about," said Galv.

With that, Bel looked toward Mia for conformation, who responded with a nod. In reality, Mia didn't quite grasp all this time travel stuff, and so, she had planned to pass the baton over to her granddaughter.

Having been graciously entrusted with this task, Bel cleared her throat, folded her arms, and proudly began. "As you will see, time travel is all about..."

The tone of her words had left Mia flabbergasted. She could see phantom spectacles perched on Bel's nose. *Ah... She's just going to repeat exactly what Ludwig once told her. You go, Bel!* Mia couldn't help the joy of seeing her past self now reflected in her granddaughter. *Her memory appears to rival even mine! I wonder, then, why she's so inept at her studies...*

As a follower of the test-taking strategy of "Just memorize it all!" Mia didn't know quite what to make of Bel.

In any case, after Bel had finished her story, Galv gave a ponderous groan. "Indeed... So those are the thoughts of the future Ludwig..." He stroked his beard and continued. "It truly is a titillating tale."

"Thank you. However...I am not fully pleased with it." Unlike Galv, Ludwig gave a bitter smile. "I wonder if there will be implications for me hearing it now..."

Had the Ludwig from the future Bel had come from already heard his theories of time travel from the Bel of the future? If so, just who had proposed the idea in the first place...? This subject only ever grew in complexity.

"However, it appears that my thinking did not account for Miss Patricia..."

Galv shook his head at Ludwig's grimace. "I disagree, my dear pupil. I believe Miss Patricia is indeed explained by your theories." Galv dropped a sugar cube into his tea, watching the ripples it created on the surface. "Should Her Highness be the stone tossed in the pond, would the waves travel only in one direction? Should she be the finger plucking the string of history, are the vibrations restrained to where her finger plucked?" He shook his head. "I think not. The stone's ripples spread as circles from the stone's

center. Should the flow of history be a line connecting beginning to end, her influence will spread in both directions. It simply means that the actions of Her Highness were so great they were able to change the past."

He spoke as if revealing the very fabric of the universe, and all Mia could do was stare at the Wandering Wise—no, the wandering old badger. She stared at him, all the while thinking to herself, *Does this old man still have his head on straight?!*

Ludwig seemed to be having similar thoughts. His expression deeply serious, he opened his mouth. "You mean to suggest it is possible to affect the predetermined past? Would such a thing really be possible?" To Mia, this sounded like a roundabout way of asking, "Have you gone mad, master?!" However...

"Indeed, it would usually be impossible. However, if Her Highness is truly that of the extraordinary and has escaped the usual flow of time, it just might be possible..." Galv continued. "It is true that one cannot change the past, but that should only apply to those who are constrained by the laws of cause and effect. In which case, would there be anything odd about one who escaped the usual flow of time influencing both the past and future through the ripples of their actions? In other words, Her Highness has become a 'cause,' creating an 'effect' in both the past and future."

"One who has escaped the usual flow of time..." That phrase had been mentioned once again, and being the only one who knew exactly why that could be the case, she could offer no rebuttals. Her memories of a life that ended at the guillotine were still with her, and she even used to have the diary that version of herself had written.

That's more than enough proof that I've escaped the usual flow of time.

"Or perhaps we may say it like this: for Her Highness's great feats to be accepted by history, there was a need for the past to change."

Ludwig's head shot up. "You mean that for a woman as great as her to exist, there must have been proper preparation in the past?"

Galv gave a solemn nod. "The principle of cause and effect is absolute. Grass cannot be grown where no seeds have been sowed. There can be no great harvests in a withered land."

"Which means for a great flower like Her Highness to bloom brilliantly, there must be someone who cultivated the earth and

planted her seed."

"Indeed. For such a grand 'effect' as Her Highness to exist, there was a need for an equally grand 'cause'—Miss Patricia. I believe that is the natural conclusion."

Mia was about to laugh away such a silly proposal, but it got caught in her throat, for Mia had seen direct evidence of the theory. *Duke Lorenz Yellowmoon said so much himself. That the words of my grandmother had given him strength...*

It was a phenomenon unexplainable by the actions Mia had taken to escape the fate of her execution. Their effect should only have the power to change the future, but as more and more grew different, the effect grew so grand it began to affect the "cause" that led to them itself.

In that case, it's true that the fastest method for solving the issue is to have the "effect" of Patty sent directly to me, the "cause," so that I can influence her directly... Just then, Mia made an exceedingly important discovery. *Moons! D-Does that mean if I don't do a good job at raising her properly, something terrible could happen?!*

A shiver made its way down Mia's back as she recalled what had happened when she considered leaving Patty in Rafina's care—a nightmare where she was murdered by the Yellowmoons. If that was the result of her failure to properly raise Patty, her "cause," then... *D-Do I have to raise Patty well enough to justify my existence?* That was the exact opposite of the passive, minimal effort attitude Mia had been taking until now.

And thus, Mia now had no choice but to actively raise Patty to protect her own existence.

Chapter 10: Bel…Lets Her Guard Down!

Assaulted with the sudden scent of danger, Mia gulped. Her sixth sense was solemnly declaring that this situation was precarious.

Bel, too, was gulping—down the tea and tea cakes, that is. She was basking in the glory of a finished job. The tea cakes today had been chosen with Galv in mind, meaning they were less sweet and more bitter than usual, but Bel paid it absolutely no mind. After many tea times with her elders like Citrina, Mia, Anne, and Ludwig, she knew how to enjoy treats of more adult tastes as well. Having thoroughly enjoyed the tea and snacks, she licked her lips and began to think things like, *I hope Rina and Grandmother Mia are doing well,* and *These snacks are so tasty!* She had completely let her guard down, and that was exactly when…

"However, that leaves us with another question." Ludwig's voice reverberated through the room.

"Another question? Which is…?" asked Mia.

All the while, Bel was regally (read: absentmindedly) enjoying the aroma of her tea.

"Miss Bel, of course."

"Huh?" This arrow had flown out of nowhere and stuck itself right into Bel's chest. She began to panic. "H-Huh? Me? Wh-Why?" She gave a dear-in-the-headlights blink to Ludwig, and he nodded.

"If there is a reason for Miss Patricia's travel through time…then there must be another reason *you* were sent to the past as well."

If Mia was a pebble thrown into the pond of history, and Bel had only been thrust here as an aftereffect, then there was no real reason for Bel to be in this era. However, there was a chance that just as the "effect" of Mia had pulled the "cause" of Patty here, the "cause" of Mia had pulled the "effect" of Bel here for some reason.

"It wouldn't make sense for Miss Patricia's time travel alone to

be explained by the principles of cause and effect. It makes most sense to believe that Miss Bel has been brought here for a specific task as well."

"Huh? No, I... I've just been brought here to see Grandmother Mia's great governing for myself...or something..."

Ludwig stroked his chin with a groan. "While it is true that seeing Her Highness's feats for yourself would be an experience difficult for a ruler to gain..."

"Yes, indeed. As a future ruler, it would surely be crucial to see Her Highness's methods up close with your own eyes. It is quite a convincing argument. However..."

"It would be preposterous to time travel for such a silly reason!" Oddly, Mia was the only one there who could point out such an obvious fact.

"Hm... I suppose it would be," said Galv. "Perhaps it is just as Miss Bel has stated, but...should we be mistaken about that fact, it is unknowable what sort of calamity might await us. I believe it best to think that Miss Bel, too, has come to us for some specific reason."

These words elicited quite the groan from Bel. The shock of learning that her respite was truly about to end was a grave one. She shrugged her shoulders to the floor, but Mia put her arm around her and offered, "Bel... One must know when to give up."

"Agh... So my break really is over..." She let out a forlorn sigh, but she quickly shifted gears. "Understood. I'll try to think if there's any reason I might be here. Then we can quickly put it behind us!"

Her ability to easily change directions had been passed down to her by none other than Mia herself.

"Well, the veracity of our assumptions do remain uncertain..."

"No. I don't believe there are any with wisdom more than you two," declared Mia. "I'm certain the answer to this problem is an elusive one. Thus, it's up to us to decide what we shall believe and what actions we shall take, and I shall trust in the advice of my most trusted vassal and the wisest man in Tearmoon."

When faced with a choice of believing herself or believing Ludwig, Mia would choose Ludwig every time without doubt. And this time, Ludwig's very teacher had offered his aid. There was no reason not to believe them. *Which means the issue of Patty is quite an important one...*

Mia nodded and looked toward Ludwig. "I am sorry to ask this

of you, but could you look into the clandestine House Clausius?"

"Miss Patricia's family?"

"Yes. We must know the reason they fell to the Serpents. Also, we need to bring Patty here as soon as possible."

Mia was quick with her actions. She immediately sent a messenger to Anne's family and began to prepare to welcome Patty to the palace.

"I suppose it would be quite conspicuous to bring Patty alone. It's probably best to bring Yanna and Kiryl along with her. In any case, I have to make them as inconspicuous as possible." While Mia thought that Yanna and Kiryl would be happiest with the Littsteins, there was nothing else Mia could do. "I'll compensate with a sweets feast from the head chef, and...what else... I suppose I must consider how to handle Patty..."

With that, Mia crossed her arms and began to ponder. *I have no other choice. I'll have to teach Patty myself.* Ready for anything, she impatiently awaited Patty's arrival.

Chapter 11: Mia Grins like a Villainous Noble Lady

"Thank goodness," exclaimed Mia, followed with a sigh. Seeing the approaching carriage left Mia with mixed emotions. She was thankful that Patty had arrived safely, but once she began to think about Patty's future...

If I am to teach her, I better avoid letting anyone know about her true identity. But more importantly, I absolutely must rip her from the Serpents' fangs! Moons, this is going to be tough... While she was inwardly thrashing about in agony, she greeted the children with a kind smile. "Welcome, everyone! Please go on and head inside."

From the moment they stepped inside the palace, all Yanna and Kiryl could do was hang their mouths open in shock. On the other hand, Patty was looking rather down—more so than usual.

My, is something the matter with her? With that question in Mia's mind, they headed deeper inside, straight to the audience chamber. If the three were going to stay in the Whitemoon Palace, they would need her father's permission. *Father is quite dense. I doubt he'll figure out who Patty is, but I must stay vigilant regardless!*

Just then, Anne approached and addressed her with a whisper. "My apologies, milady. Actually..."

"Oh, Anne! Thank you for watching over the children for me."

"I did my absolute best," she said with a smile. "But, milady, there is something about Miss Patty that I wish to discuss with you..."

The information Anne shared left Mia flabbergasted. "She...cried? *Patty* did?!"

"Yes. I'm not sure as to why, but..." Anne's expression grew dark. "I believe becoming a Serpent has caused her suffering. I think it would be best to quickly reveal we aren't with them." Anne's desire to tell Patty she could be free of the Serpents was written all over her face.

"Hmph, I see..." Mia took a moment to consider. At least given

Anne's words, Mia couldn't see the harm in doing so. However... *No, that would be too dangerous. If there's something causing Patty to feel that she absolutely must become a Serpent, there's a chance that telling her the truth would only cause her to reject us. For example, the Serpents could have taken a relative of hers as a captive. I want to know more about this "Hannes" as well. In any case, this isn't a clear-cut issue.*

Suddenly, Patty approached her with a bowed head. "My apologies, Miss Mia. I lost my composure."

"Raise your head, Patty." While Mia had been caught off guard by the suddenness of her words, she took a deep breath and collected her thoughts. "Listen well—there's nothing wrong with having unsettled emotions. I do not know why you are giving it so much mind."

"What do you mean?" Patty glared at her as if trying to read the depths of her heart. "The Serpents...mustn't waver. That is what I was taught. Did you not send me to that home to test me?"

Patty's words had Mia groaning. *I see. How silly. And yet, how like the Serpents.* It was true that as an organization with a goal as ridiculous as destroying order itself, being a prisoner to one's emotions would not get them anywhere, but...

Mia took a moment to think of an excuse. Thankfully, this month, Mia was in her best shape. Worried that her father would figure out Patty's identity, she had strengthened her mind thoroughly with the head chef's vegetable cakes so that she'd be able to throw him off the trail as much as was necessary!

"It is indeed true that if you can steal your heart and always act with composure, you will not make mistakes. However, reality never works out so smoothly. Thus, what is most important is simply knowing."

"Knowing...? Knowing what?"

"The fact that all hearts waver, of course."

It was impossible to always be on top of your game. It would certainly be ideal if one could completely act with a steeled heart, but in reality, it was impossible to keep your composure at all times and places. Thus, it was necessary to know that fact and make the proper preparations so that you could continue even when your heart wavered.

This was something Mia knew well. In an ideal world, there would be no waves, and Mia could lazily float down a peaceful sea.

She still wanted to be the aurelia, but a calm, quiet one. However, there were no seas without waves, and at times, there would be storms that turned those into whitecaps.

Then, what was one to do? Work hard to prevent waves? Pray for perpetual clear skies? The answer to both those questions was of course, no. Mia would never expend energy for such a fruitless endeavor. Thus...

You must act with the presumption that waves will come. When one does, you must simply ride it, and take the proper preparations to make such a thing possible.

Mia smugly crossed her arms and began to share her personal experiences. “A wavering heart cannot be avoided. Thus, you must act with the expectations that your heart *will* waver and prepare accordingly. What’s key is making sure that you do not lose sight of what’s important when it does. No matter how emotional you may be, you absolutely must always know what it is you wish to do. Oh, and just to be clear, the answer is *not* to ‘destroy order and sow chaos.’ While there may come a day when you become a Serpent and this *is* your task, your task *now* is to simply study. Your top priority is learning as much from me as you can.”

Mia was satisfied with her logic, for by giving Patty a new definition of “what it is she must do despite what her heart wills,” it would be easier to lead her in the right direction. It was a perfectly upstanding teaching that at a glance appeared like a Serpent maxim.

Oho! I’m such a genius! All that’s left is...

Mia turned to Patty to land the finishing blow. “Thus, while you’re here, you are free to act like the child you are.”

“Huh...? Wh-Wh-Why?” Patty’s eyes darted around in confusion.

“Why, that’s simple!” Mia parroted a line spoken by the villain in one of the novels she had borrowed from Chloe. “It would be a loss for us Serpents to work you so hard you break. Thus, forget about all the complicated things and take it easy. You must absolutely *not* push yourself. This is all for the sake of the Serpents!” With that, Mia began to cackle like the evilest of villains, just like the wicked noble woman of Chloe’s novel.

Mia was clearly not used to these sorts of expressions, and thus, she came off awkwardly. Still, it was enough to leave Patty gulping in fear! That was how Mia had stolen the heart of a girl deep in a

pit of snakes.

That was when she suddenly heard a voice from behind.

“Oh, Mia. There you are. My, and who is that...?”

Chapter 12: She's My Second Favorite, Right Behind My Big Sister!

"Who is this, Mia?"

Why does father have to be here?! The voice caused Mia to freeze. She awkwardly turned around to find none other than her father, Emperor Matthias. *I doubt it would be a good idea to make up any excuses, and I was planning on having them meet anyway. Just as I originally planned, I'll introduce her nonchalantly. After all, just like there's no better place to hide a mighty steed than the Equestrian Kingdom, there's no better place to hide a child than a group of children!*

Mia gave a gentle smile. "Greetings, father. What perfect timing. This is Patricia, the girl I told you about the other night." As she spoke, she took careful care in ensuring she was not rushing her words, placing her hand on Patty's shoulder as she did so. "And these two are a pair of siblings, Yanna and Kiryl," she quickly added. "The three of them are students in the new Special Elementary Education Course at Saint-Noel Academy. I occasionally teach them lessons."

"Oho! So they have been taught by your very hands."

Matthias watched them with great interest. Faced with his gaze, Kiryl couldn't help but shudder. He grabbed his sister's skirt with his small hands. Yanna, on the other hand, was expressionless, her face frozen in fear. While she had crossed words with many adults in the slums, coming face-to-face with the ruler of a nation was a different beast. The status of those she had come to know in Saint-Noel might have felt far off in the academy, but their overwhelming authority—both the irrefutable strength of the man before them *and* the power of Mia, the girl who loved him as a father—was bright as day when inside the lavishly large Whitemoon Palace.

Mia took a step forward to shield the children from his gaze. "You'll only frighten them staring like that," she said with crossed arms and an exasperated glare. At least to Mia, Rafina was much scarier than her father. While her demeanor had softened as of late,

a lion was still a lion. Thus, Mia couldn't help but view her father in a different, more...unthreatening light. *Well, I suppose fears are each his own.*

Matthias groaned. "I had no intent on scaring them..." he grumbled, then glanced at Patty. "But...I see. So you are Patricia..." He took a moment to stare, but then he chuckled. "Mia was as right as always. Your name does conjure her impression. If I wasn't watching myself, I would have said you looked just like my mother." Matthias knelt on the floor to match the height of his gaze with Patty's. Then, he reached out a hand and placed it on her cheek. "But your hair, and those beautiful eyes that seem to conceal the depths of your emotions... Looking at you like this, it's like I'm looking right at her. How peculiar."

“Th-That’s just proof of your simplicity! This is just as I predicted!” came Mia in a panic. *Ugh… He’s sharper than I thought. I don’t think most people would be able to recognize their mother if they showed up before them as such a young child…* While Mia was half impressed by her father’s acumen, the other half was… *But to see your mother in someone so young! She may be the real deal…but there’s something quite…well…* Mia’s feelings on the matter were complicated.

“Yes… You’re right. Perhaps I am too simple.” He stood with a bitter grin before looking once again at Kiryl and Yanna. “So you’re the elder sister, and you’re the younger brother…” The sound of his voice had the two sitting up as straight as pins. Matthias took one look at Yanna and…completely ignored her! He instead approached Kiryl. “By the way, Kiryl…what do you think of my dear daughter Mia?”

“Huh?” Kiryl’s shock had him blinking so much it seemed like his eyelashes were about to fly off his face. “U-Um…I think she’s very pretty and very kind!” It was a perfect answer!

Oho! I knew that Yanna was quite sharp, but in spite of his young age, Kiryl is nothing to mock either! He must know how to read a room to give my father an answer he’s bound to love like it was nothing!

As if to support Mia’s appraisal, Matthias exclaimed, “Oho! You’ve got a good eye on you!” with a jubilant laugh. But then, his expression grew grave. “Then…do you *like* Mia?”

Matthias glared into Kiryl’s eyes, who simply titled his head and said, “Yes, I love Mia! She’s my second favorite, right behind my big sister!”

“Oho…” Matthias crossed his arms, his glare still as intense as ever. “I see… So she’s right behind your big sister… Aha ha! How admirable! What a commendable child you are!” His grin extended to both ears. “Your tastes are quite promising if you are fond of my daughter, and I quite liked to hear that she was second behind your big sister. If you had said she was your favorite, I wouldn’t have been able to fully trust you!” He turned his eyes to Abel, who had come to meet up with the group during the conversation. “Isn’t that right, Prince Abel?”

All Abel could do was choke out an awkward laugh.

Chapter 13: Work, Work, Cake... Cake, Cake, Veg Cake!

Having safely welcomed the children into the palace, Mia now found herself in her room. She let out a sigh. “Until we look into House Clausius, I won’t be able to properly judge Patty.”

If what Matthias had told her was any basis, the end of Marquess Clausius was shrouded in mystery. “The lack of an heir is the reason, but the particulars are quite jumbled,” he had said with a scowl. “It began with a conflagration at the villa the Marquess was staying in. His home in the Clausius domain was burned to the ground. At first, there were many rumors—that it was bandits, or a disagreement with another noble house, or an assassin—but in the end, it was determined that he had acquired hefty debts.” He shrugged. “The valuable artworks had all been removed from the home, though whether that was used to repay his debts, or...”

“Or whether he disappeared with his valuables to escape his debts, I presume? I see... That certainly doesn’t reflect well on his character.” Despite any assumptions that could be made about Mia, she was the princess of the Tearmoon Empire, making her quite knowledgeable about the inner thought processes of the average noble.

“House Clausius was a prosperous marquess house of Tearmoon, but more than that, it was my mother’s family. By the time this incident had occurred, my mother had already passed, but it was not a matter to be ignored. Luckily, the house had no heirs, and there were none who would have paid it any mind should it be allowed to be buried into the darkness of the past. Thus, I ordered the Azure Moon Ministry to extinguish the fires that its end had started.”

“Then the bits of information that had been leaked were construed into conspiracies about a cursed noble house.”

While this new information had initially shocked Mia, it still did not alleviate her doubts. *Suspicions about a possible assassination*

were easily cleared by the knowledge of his prodigious debts and missing valuables, but…is there truly nothing to this? As Mia had just used the same principle of "when given a reasonable explanation, people do not think any further," she couldn't help but find these circumstances suspicious. *I really must look into this further.*

Still, that was a task much easier said than done. For one, she lacked personnel. The previous Empress Patricia's time travel into the future was a top secret matter. Of course, she could conceal that fact, but her research into House Clausius alone was bound to raise questions. Mia wanted to avoid any surprises—for example, carelessly sticking her head into a wooden hole in the wall only to discover it was a guillotine. What lay behind every corner in town was a possible decapitation, and thus, Mia needed to limit investigations to only those she had absolute trust in.

The fact they couldn't rely on written records was another issue. *There's a possibility that what's written may change, just like my old diary did.* Normally, old documents could be relied on in examining such matters, but to reach the truth, they would need to rely on personal recollections, which was quite the tall order.

Above all else was the fact that House Clausius was tied to the Chaos Serpents. Any investigation into them had to be done through taking meticulous caution about their meticulous caution.

"Ludwig said he would have Gilbert look into the matter, but that still leaves me a bit worried. Well…if Ludwig says it's fine, I'm certain it is…" In any case, there was nothing Mia could do about the matter. She might have been the Sage of the Empire, but her sagacity was the type that could not help in investigations.

That of course begged the question. "Well, then. What type of sagacity *does* she have? In what manner *could* it help?" And the answer to that was… Well, there really wasn't an answer, but in any case, her sagacity certainly wouldn't help now.

Thus, Mia set her sights on solving another issue. "For now, my focus is Patty's education. I also need to look over the reports I've received…" Mia took the documents that had been delivered from Ludwig into her hands and began to pass her eyes over their text. While the particulars could all be left to Ludwig, it was important for her to have a proper grasp on the situation…or at least, to pretend like she did. Taking the position of watcher would bring anyone into focus, for when unwatched, people were creatures who would take the easy route. Mia had experienced it firsthand.

Yes, to be absolutely clear, people, at their core, were lazy. They try to get out of anything they can. And this was exactly why it was so important to make it clear that they were being carefully watched. But even more than that...

"Knowing that there is the prize of cake waiting for them at the end is an important aspect of working hard, especially before tests. Thus, I'll need to be sure to give her the proper amount of cake. It's my secret technique!"

One cannot always be locked in and at the top of their game. Thus, it was important to rest and reward one's efforts. Cake was an irrefutable necessity for working hard. Two parts work to one part cake was a ratio that had to be protected.

"Oh, but Anne would yell at me if all we had was cake. I'll have to mix in vegetable cake as well. Two parts cake to one part vegetable cake...keeping that division is important."

Mia had made the fatal mistake of replacing "work" with "cake," but she was none the wiser. In any case, she mulled over these thoughts as she read through the documents before her when it became easily apparent that there was a group working behind the scenes without a hitch. "Various areas have begun to grow more dangerous, it seems... However, there don't seem to have been any attacks on troops transporting goods just yet. The combined forces of the Princess Guard and the private army of the Redmoons appear to be doing their job well."

In the previous timeline, bandits from all over had given Mia quite a rough time. Thus, she had Vanos and Ruby take precautions in advance, and their convoy had been functioning beautifully.

"Oho! Getting Ruby on my side really was the right move!" Just as Mia was grinning to herself...

"Excuse me, milady. Um, Miss Ruby has come to see you."

Mia lifted her head at the sound of Anne's voice. "My, Ruby...?"

She quickly switched over to serious mode. As vice-captain of the Princess Guard, Ruby Etoile Redmoon was a woman of great importance. Well, her position as daughter of one of the Four Dukes should have given her that title anyway... Even among them, Ruby was currently of special import, which meant that if Ruby had come to visit, Mia had to greet her with the proper manners.

"I was just thinking I needed to praise her good work. I will of course meet with her. Please let her in."

However, the state of Ruby had left Mia's mouth agape in

shock.

“Wah... M-Miss Mia!” Her usual cool demeanor had been replaced with a face sopping wet with tears. It was so unlike her, it left Mia speechless.

“Moons, what is it? This isn’t like you at all!” As these words left her, Mia already knew there was trouble brewing.

Chapter 14: A Teary Ruby Discusses Love

For now, Mia had Ruby take a seat and ordered Anne to bring some tea and snacks. Anne gave a vigorous nod of "You got it, boss!" and rushed out of the room. After seeing her off, Mia returned her eyes to Ruby. Her nose was dyed crimson as she sniffled over and over—there were no traces of her usual cool, detached demeanor to be found. Just as Mia began to imagine what circumstances could have left her so distraught...a shiver ran down her spine.

"M-Moons! Did something happen to Vanos?!"

Vanos, captain of the Princess Guard, was the man Ruby's heart was set on. He was a seasoned warrior, and while his skills with a sword could not compete with Dion's, he was still the crème of the crop, and even Mia lauded his good character. He was of a special hard to come by countenance of a different type than the Empire's Finest, and just imagining that something could have happened to that friendly giant left Mia feeling anxious. But what came out of Ruby's mouth was completely unexpected.

"I-I... I'm to be...betrothed!" she choked out through her sobs.

"My, betrothed?" Mia couldn't help her lack of surprise at the statement. *Ruby is of age, and it has already happened to Esmeralda. There's nothing strange there. Sapphias even has had a fiancé for quite a while.* Even *those two* had already been betrothed. Mia was certain that such talks would find their way to Ruby as well if things had worked out for them. However...

"All you need to do is come up with some excuse to refuse! This really isn't like you at all." Mia wasn't quite sure what had the girl so worried. "You could say you want to respect your duty to me, or that you plan to move on to the Ebony Moon Ministry one day, or anything at all that would give you a reason not to marry just yet."

Even Mia had been able to come up with some impromptu excuses. Refusal should be easy! At least, that's what Mia thought,

but Ruby slowly shook her head.

"That's what I said! But it didn't work! They said he was someone who...who would help me work at the Ebony Moon Ministry and to carry out my duties to you!" she sobbed. Her teary eyes looked into Mia's. "His name is Hildebrandt, and he's a knight...and second son of Marquess Cotillard..."

Mia's eyes were as big as saucers. "Hildebrandt! Moons... *That* Hildebrandt?!" Hildebrandt Cotillard was the second son of Marquess Cotillard, the same family Mia's mother Adelaide hailed from. In other words, he was Mia's cousin, and... "Ah, so that's why he was there. I thought it was strange to see him so close to Lunatear." Yes, he was none other than the man who had given Mia that passionate gaze on their trip back home. "So that's how it is. That does make things complicated..."

For the daughter of a high-ranking noble, marriage was a matter inseparable from political strategy. Just as it had been for Esmeralda, political alliances were behind this proposal. So, what were those political alliances, and what aims did Duke Redmoon have in making this arrangement? *He's...trying to strengthen his alliance with* me.

This was not a move to create stronger ties with the imperial crown but with Mia herself, which was quite frankly a big pain in the neck. The Cotillards had no imperial blood running through their veins; as the maiden family of the deceased wife of Emperor Matthias, their only blood ties were with Mia. Because relations of blood were not the only ties that connected noble houses, it would be wrong to say there was absolutely no reason to create alliances with the family of the previous empress. However, it was doubtful that was a connection the mighty Redmoons would be after. Given their strong relation with the family of the emperor, there was little to be gained by uniting their family with the Cotillards. The only explanation was to strengthen ties with *Mia*.

In a way, this was also a declaration of the Redmoons' support for Mia as the heir to the throne through acknowledgment of Mia's political power. In preparing this marriage, Ruby's father was officially announcing himself as one of Mia's supporters.

"Your father and I have had quite a good relationship, so I presume this marriage is meant as a show of affection toward me. Your betrothed being my cousin makes this quite the pain..."

Had this been one of Mia's enemies, she could have gone on the

attack! However, given this was a show of courtesy backed by hefty merits, that wasn't so easy. Given Ruby's position as a Redmoon, it would be preposterous to try to refuse by revealing Ruby's fondness for Vanos, as a noble woman like her would assuredly never be allowed to fall in love with a common soldier. It would never be enough to turn down such an auspicious proposal, which was also what had driven Ruby so close to the end of her rope. Being cornered, she had come to Mia not with her usual composure, but with pitiable tears...

Wait. Mia suddenly recalled the Horsemanship Tournament at Saint-Noel's, when she had come to Mia sobbing just as she was now. *Love surprisingly can turn anyone's heart into that of a lovesick maiden.* This completely explained Ruby's reaction, but it didn't justify turning a blind eye. *Getting in the way of someone drunk on love is more dangerous than carelessly approaching Kuolan! Plus...*

"Waaaah! Miss Miaaa!" cried Ruby, looking at Mia with a face that could inspire nothing but pity. Mia wasn't able to stand down when pit against that.

While I am grateful for the Redmoons' favor, there's no point if it leaves Ruby so distraught. All right! With that, Mia resolved herself to be Ruby's ally. As a young woman, she knew Ruby's feelings well. "Don't worry, Ruby. There's no need to cry. I'm on the case!"

Just then, Anne returned with perfect timing. Hidden within the tea's aroma was the unmistakable scent of vegetable cake (unmistakable to Mia, that is).

"For now, let's take a break and calm down while we enjoy some tea. There's cake too! And it seems like it's the best the chef has to offer."

For now, it was tasty treats! The first thing in order was some cleared heads.

Chapter 15: Mia, an Intervening Cupid, Goes into Action!

After Ruby had partly recuperated thanks to some tea and tea cakes (which upon seeing Mia couldn't help but think, *Sweets really are the best!*), Mia sent her on her way. The moment the door closed she let out a long, looong sigh.

"Well, this is quite the difficult problem."

Ruby's proposal was not the type to be easily refused. Duke Manzana Redmoon had proceeded with the engagement in order to ally with Mia; slighting that gesture would only drive a nail in their relationship. A compromise would be difficult to find, but even more worrisome was...

"We have to consider Vanos's feelings as well..."

As Mia's own cousin was involved in the matter, she had no qualms about interfering. But in the end, that would only delay the real issue.

"As a daughter of one of the Redmoons, Ruby will have to marry one day..."

And just what did Ruby plan to do when that time came? Should Duke Redmoon refuse a marriage between Vanos and Ruby due to their different stations, Mia would offer all the aid she could. But the real issue was how Vanos felt.

"If her feelings are one-sided, it would be wrong to push it on him. Hm..."

Mia could not champion the abuse of a commoner by a high-ranking noble, for there was the real possibility that the lion Rafina —though now more the temperance of a house cat—would reawaken to her apex predator ways.

"I can't do anything that would put a damper on his morale either."

Vanos performed his duties as captain of the Princess Guard with vigor, and Mia didn't want to do anything that might change that. Thus...

“It would be best if Vanos fell in love with Ruby as well... If that were to happen, I would be able to support them with everything I have but... Gwah! Moons, I can’t even imagine him falling for Ruby!” Mia was at a loss. “Well, for now, I need to do something to derail their negotiations of the marriage...” Mia was thinking so hard about the matter that smoke was billowing from her ears, but just then, Anne came in with a message.

“Excuse me, milady. Um...Captain Vanos has come to see you.”

That was the last name Mia was expecting to hear. “My... How rare for him to come visit...” Mia fired herself up with a huff of her nose and returned to her ponderings. *Ruby just visited, and now Vanos has come. Is this a coincidence? Or...*

All was silent as Mia racked her brains. Then...she gave up! Thinking about it wasn’t going to get her anywhere.

“In any case, I want to applaud his efforts with the provision caravans. Please let him in.”

Thus, he entered the room...

“Greetings, Your Highness.” As soon as he stepped inside, Vanos took a knee. “I am incredibly pleased to see you have returned safely.” He, too, was as polite as can be.

“My, Captain Vanos. You sound just like Ludwig!” Mia giggled. “There’s no need for such formalities. Being so stiff with your words will make you stiff in your shoulders! And that would limit your movements. I don’t have to be worried about your abilities to keep me safe, do I?”

“You never change, Your Highness.” He lifted his face to reveal an indescribable grimace. “Seeing your predictions come true one right after another these last few months has left me quivering in my boots.”

“My, that’s no reason to fear! You all have made the proper preparations and believed my words, which is why things have gone so smoothly. I’m very proud of all of you. The Princess Guard has been serving me well.” She gave a joyful laugh before it morphed into a look of questioning. “Is that what brought you here today?”

“Oh, no... It’s...” He scratched his head. “It’s about our vice-captain, Miss Ruby...”

“Hm? Is there something off with her? I was under the impression she was doing well.”

His expression softened. “She’s doing a hell of a job. I took her for a run-of-the-mill high-class woman, but she’s got grit. She just...seems to be down as of late...”

Moons! Could this mean...? Mia listened to the rest of his words with bated breath.

“She’s our vice-captain. If she doesn’t give her all, it’ll hurt the troops.”

Mia’s eyes were trained for one thing—love. Despite his words, she sized him up with those eyes, ascertaining every detail of his expression. *He...appears to be simply worried about her as comrades. No, but...well, there’s not* not *a chance...*

That chance was as small as a thread, but no matter how thin the path, there was no choice but forward. On the other end was a love story between a noblewoman and commoner that crossed boundaries of both age and position, and Mia absolutely wanted to see it! As a devotee to the romance novel, she was in full romance mode!

If that’s the case, I can spare no efforts! Suddenly, Mia was all in. “I see. In that case, I’ll be sure to do something about it!” She took the task upon herself with a fist to her chest that screamed, “leave it all to me!” Then, she was on the move. “What’s first in order is doing something about Hildebrandt!”

Thus, an intervening cupid quietly took flight.

Chapter 16: Those Who Change, and the One Who Must (aka Mia)

“In any case, Hildebrandt has probably returned to the Cotillard domain... No, I suppose he’s most likely at their villa here in Lunatear.”

It was unlikely that he would have simply greeted Duke Redmoon only to leave soon after. While he was only the second son, he was still of a noble family, all of whom were busy. Watching Mia might not make it seem that way, but...that’s how nobles are. Trust me.

He might have needed to have an audience with the emperor, or perhaps he planned to visit the grave of his aunt—in other words, Mia’s mother, Adelaide. That would take ten days at the very minimum, meaning he was probably staying in the city.

“In that case, I best move quickly.” As soon as that thought passed her mind, Mia was on the move. After having Anne help her change, she was off to the barracks of the Princess Guard to arrange for her escorts. Usually, such would have been tasked to Ludwig, or perhaps Captain Vanos or Vice-Captain Ruby, but...time was short. Luckily, the barracks were in the palace’s vicinity, so it would likely be fine. On her way, she ran into Abel, who happily agreed to act as one of her guards. Together, they merrily made their way down the city streets.

“Look, Abel! That shop is the best... Ah!” Realizing she was on the verge of forgetting the task at hand, she thought better and closed her mouth, rushing to the barracks as fast as her feet would take her.

When they finally arrived, the place was bustling.

Currently, the Princess Guard’s forces were divided into thirds —one, the original members of the imperial guard, the second, Dion Alaia and his men, and the third, the group of twenty female knights the Redmoons provided under Ruby’s commands. The last

group were the most elite forces the Redmoons had at their disposal.

"My, Your Highness! Greetings." However, one of them addressed Mia directly. She had a dignified air about her, and there was a pep in her step.

"The pleasure is mine. I assume you are with the Redmoons?"

"Yes, my name is Celes, and I was dispatched here by Duke Redmoon. Just what brings you...? Ah, could you be looking for your friend from the Equestrian Kingdom?"

"Hm? The Equestrian Kingdom?" Unable to follow the flow of the conversation, Mia was led to the stables where she found a familiar face. "My, Aima! So this is where you've been."

Having heard Mia's voice, Aima turned around and giddily approached. "Ah, Princess Mia. Are you on a journey somewhere?" Today, Aima was not dressed in the traditional attire of the Equestris, but in a Tearmoon-made dress. Mia had only known her gallant figure on horseback, but like this, she looked like she could be the daughter of any noble house. "Hm? Does something trouble you?"

"No, I was just thinking those clothes suit you."

"Ah, right..." She lifted her skirt up into the air and began to wave it around. As if he did not know where to look, Abel awkwardly cleared his throat and turned his head.

"That's not how a proper lady should act, Aima."

"My apologies," she said with a giggle. "You say these clothes suit me, but I believe it is Xiaolei who would prefer them. When you have time, invite her here for me." Ever since the Matching of Steeds, the two had forged a bond of friendship. As two horse lovers, it seems they could see eye to eye. "You have many fine steeds here, suitable for the personal guard of one such as you, Princess Mia," she said, staring into the stables.

"My, does it really look that way to someone who knows the moonhares of the Equestrian Kingdom as well as yourself?"

Aima gave a bitter smile. "Hmph. I might have once made light of them. Both Xiaolei and I subscribed to the common views of us Equestris and thus believed the fastest horses to be the best. But after the Matching of Steeds, my eyes were opened. It was truly a matching between fine mounts. I could feel it in my blood." She clenched her fists. "I can still see you two coming over the hill. Dongfeng and the rest of them are fine steeds." She grinned.

“Xiaolei, I, and all the clan’s chiefs changed because of you... Perhaps my brother shall as well...”

“Ah, that’s right. How *is* your brother doing?” Mia had heard of his injuries, but not of the particulars. Ka Maku was an excellent shaman chaser, and it wouldn’t bode well if his wounds happened to be grave.

“His wounds must heal. Until then, he will not be able to work as he once did. My brother is truly pitiful.” Her anger boiled over, but eventually, she shrugged her shoulders. “Well, perhaps this is simply what he needs.”

“Hmph... Yes. It’s important to take the time to rest.”

“No, not that. Outside of pursuing the Serpents, there is a greater goal that lies in wait for my brother.”

“And that would be?”

“Sharing words with the High Priestess...Valentina.”

“With my sister?” Abel had been silent, but he couldn’t hide his surprise. Still, he quickly nodded in understanding. “I see... Perhaps you’re right.”

“I heard the Holy Lady has given her consent.”

“My, has she? But is that safe? Perhaps it’s not right to say so to his sister herself, but the wolfmaster is quite the brute. There’s no knowing what putting the two of them together might bring about...”

“I somewhat share your views... However, the Holy Lady told me that it is not just Tearmoon that has a Dion Alaia.” She shook her head with a shiver. “It is truly frightening... To think men such as him are to be found all over...”

Trying to protect her own sanity as well, Mia added some words. “But isn’t that just a figure of speech? It would be disastrous if men like him could truly be found everywhere.”

The two nodded in shared understanding before Aima continued. “In any case, it is a fine opportunity. If he can talk with the High Priestess, he must. I believe it is time he faces what must be faced...and it is time for him to change. I will not stand for him to run.”

“Yes... I see.” Just as Aima had changed—and just as Xiaolei had—perhaps the High Priestess and Maku could change too. Mia couldn’t help but pray that should they, it be for the better. “Oh, that’s right. What were you doing here, Aima?”

“I have left Keilai here. However, I have been lacking in

exercise, so I was planning on going for a ride with him and Hasuki. Do you wish to join me? Prince Abel and I could race…"

"As much as I would love to, we have somewhere to be." Mia explained the situation.

"In that case, I must accompany you." She grinned. "You mustn't let your body grow soft, Princess. Why not go for a horseback ride?"

"I suppose you have a point." Mia licked her lips. They tasted of the sweet vegetable cake she had just partaken in…

I did just eat something sweet. I better exercise!

Must *she* change too? Was there anything about *herself* that she must repent? Thinking those questions over, she silently nodded, led by the pressing emotions they caused to well up inside her.

Chapter 17: Princess Mia Makes a Visit

Once leaving the stables, Ruby appeared before them in a bit of a panic. “W-Welcome, Your Highness.” She had been called by Celes, who was watching the gates, and seemed quite embarrassed about the whole ordeal. “M-My apologies for earlier. It seems that when it comes to my own love troubles, I tend to lose my composure. If only I could be as calm and collected as you always are,” she said, sagging her shoulders.

Mia smiled. “It’s nothing to worry yourself over. To be as composed as someone such as myself, you need to overcome many battles.”

While it was true Mia had been through some battles...whether she was “composed” was questionable.

“What matter do you have with the Princess Guard?” asked Ruby.

“I’ve come to thank them for their hard work and see their labors for myself,” she said. Then, her smile grew mischievous. “I’ll also soon be off to see Hildebrandt, so I came to prepare my convoy.”

“Huh...? Y-You’re to meet with Lord Hildebrandt?” Her face grew tense.

Mia responded with a nod. “Yes. I want to hear what he has to say. There’s a lot to be considered when it comes to solving your troubles.” With that, Mia stepped inside the building and her eyes grew wide.

“Welcome, Your Highness!”

“All hail Her Highness!”

Mia stepped inside to find the imperial guard in line and at attention on both sides of the hall.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to interrupt your hard work,” she said with a calm smile. The Princess Guard was full of knights who worked loyally. Mia had surmised so much from skimming Ludwig’s

reports. Mia had been thinking about giving them a bonus, much less just a smile.

As she walked through the halls, she stopped at one of the rooms to take the opportunity to watch their labors while she was here. This visit sent the knights into a panic as they hurriedly cleared out of her way. In the center of the room was a desk, and atop it were toy chess pieces.

Mia tilted her head. “My, what is this for?”

“We are tracking our men, ma’am! This piece is our carriages, and the smaller ones are our knights!” The soldier who answered stood up as straight as a pin.

“I see... The number of our men and carriages determines how we must work.”

This tactical simulation had been proposed by one of Ludwig’s fellow apprentices. The group of brains under Galv had drastically increased the Princess Guard’s proficiency.

“And what is this board for?”

“We divide our men into platoons in rotation! Those on top with a golden frame are the guards of Her Glorious Highness, Princess Mia!”

“So you track even that... This is quite the job.”

“Sir Ludwig has thankfully dispatched us with civil officials! They carry out this work!”

Carrying out conversations just as these, Mia walked through the barracks and observed their work with great interest. Once she had reached the other end of the hall, she turned around and began to speak. “Thank you all for your hard work. I salute your efforts. I know we are in a tough situation, but...you have my faith.” She bowed her head to them before entering Ruby’s office with the rest of her retinue. She took a seat and groaned. *Hmph... So many of them seemed so stiff. It seems like we have quite a lot of serious workers. As their workload is only increasing, I hope they can find the time for some breaks, or at least something that could act as a diversion from their troubles... Perhaps they need some sweets!* Mia crossed her arms in deep thought.

As soon as Mia had disappeared inside Ruby’s room, the soldiers relaxed their shoulders.

“That was nerve-racking...”

“Sure was. But it was even more moving...”

Those were the impressions they shared between themselves. Just as Vanos had on his visit, they, too, had been given the opportunity to bask in Mia's great wisdom. The average person was left painfully unaware of what was going on behind the scenes in this country; perhaps those who had been directly in danger's path had realized, but the majority of citizens were blissfully ignorant of the great danger that threatened Tearmoon—nay, the whole continent—and that it was none other than their very princess who was keeping it at bay. However, the knights gathered here today knew exactly the danger of that threat...

"Her Highness predicted these events when she was merely twelve years old on her visit to the Newmoon District! It sounds too fantastical to believe..." said one.

"Who cares if it was made up to justify her prowess. Under orders of Her Highness, we've stocked provisions, received imports from nations abroad, and are freely providing them to the people who are wanting. That fact won't change," said another.

And just like that, they were nodding to one another with the words, "You're exactly right."

Many of their friends and family had been saved by provisions procured under Mia's orders. While Mia wished for their efforts to never come to public light...pride still burgeoned in their chests.

"We must never sully Her Highness's name."

Holding the radiant pride of being in the Princess Guard close to their chests, today—just like any other—they gave their all.

Chapter 18: Princess Mia…Makes a Misstep!

Now with escorts, Mia and the others headed for the villa of Marquess Cotillard…and they were all on horseback, for the other two in attendance were Abel and Aima, just as originally had been planned.

"I don't think I've ever been here before," whispered Mia, staring up at the Cotillard mansion located in the corner of Lunatear dedicated to noble manors. The relationship between Mia and the Cotillards was a fundamentally good one. Their domain was famous for textiles, and they had many boutiques. As a child, Mia often visited to go on shopping sprees. Her uncle, the marquess, always happily watched over his dear niece—though to be honest, it was really more that he was catering to Mia's selfishness—and would often give her wonderful dresses. She had fond memories of a stuffed animal that he had once gifted to her made of finer cloth.

However, it was not as if there were strong familial ties between them. Mia was always after their textiles, and she was not particularly close with any of her relatives. Thus, she never had an occasion to visit their manor in the capital, making this one her first.

After discussing briefly with the gatekeepers, the Princess Guard returned to Mia. "Lord Hildebrandt Cotillard will soon come to greet us. They ask that you wait briefly within the gates."

Mia looked at the gatekeepers in question, who looked utterly shocked at the fact Mia was on horseback. *Oho ho! They're completely taken by my radiant and imposing appearance!*

Mia's hobby of horsemanship was famous, but there were still many who found themselves shocked when seeing it in person. Those who dismissed it as a princess's whim seemed to find the sight of her on a horse especially mind-boggling. But Mia didn't view horses as a hobby at all—it was a lifeline, one thick enough it exceeded the limits of a "line" and was more like a rope. Thus, Mia

truly loved horses and had no qualms about paying them their proper respects.

Anyway, pleased with the look the guardsmen were giving her, she put on a haughty grin and said, “In that case, let us wait inside.” She set her horse into a trot, her two cavalrymen advancing as well to protect her. Abel, to her right, and Aima, to her left, also followed in short, and the group made an extravagant entry into the villa.

“My, this is quite the garden.” Having entered the gates, Mia alighted from her horse. The garden before her seemed to stretch on forever in a beautiful green. The trees and lawn were carefully kept, and it was littered with curious structures that looked like wooden fences.

“Do you think they’re meant to keep out a cavalry?”

“I’m not sure...” Mia went to approach the structures. That was when a shiver made its way down her back. The feeling on her foot —the sound it made, the disgusting sensation—was one Mia had experienced before. It had been quite a while, back when she had once gone to head to the beaches on Saint-Noel island...

She lifted her foot in trepidation. On the bottom of her sole was something...terribly *muddy*.

“Eek! No, is this—?!”

While all Mia could do was quiver, Aima casually approached and said, “Yup. Horse dung.”

Yes, it was none other than horse dung, stepping in which being a common experience of her time in the horsemanship club.

“Agh! Why is it in this garden of all places?!”

“It is nothing to worry about, Princess Mia. Horses are holy. Thus, you have not been sullied. It is a blessing that in fields leads to bountiful crops,” she said with a smile that Mia had no interest in joining her in. While Mia loved and respected horses, she had no love for horse dung.

Ugh, why did this have to happen?!

This was an obvious damper on her spirits, especially given that the shoes she was wearing today were the special ones she faced off against both Ruby and the wolfmaster with. While they were starting to outgrow her feet and were not without their marks, they were still a beloved pair Mia had no plans on replacing just yet.

My memories have been defiled!

“Mia, if you’d like, I’d be happy to give you a new pair.” Even

Abel's kind offer was not enough to recover her spirits... Just kidding!

"My! I'd love any present from *you*, Abel!" she exclaimed with a grin that could light up the room. Thinking over it again, these shoes didn't really mean much to her! She was so happy she even began to hum.

This really was a blessing! I was lucky to have stepped in this horse dung! Horses really are my friends! Mia's romance mode was enough to overcome anything. *This might be a message from the heavens telling me that good things happen when I'm with horses! No, I'm certain it is!* She was so overjoyed she even began to have thoughts like this. Mia was a simple woman when it came to love.

"Perhaps this means that horses run through these gardens," said Abel, observing the scene before them.

"Indeed. I believe the posts are for jumps. They are made to prevent injuries, so they fall easily."

Abel clapped. "I see. This certainly wouldn't be enough to stop an army, but it makes for a perfect training ground."

"Be off, Silver Arrow!" Suddenly, a mighty voice reverberated in the air. A horse began to approach them, but it didn't take the most straightforward path. Instead, it ran through the garden, hopping over the jumps as if to make a display of the rider's prowess. The man on top was none other than the man Mia had come to meet. "Good day, Princess Mia," he said with a stunning bow after gallantly jumping from his horse.

Chapter 19: Face-to-Face with an Agreeable Youth

Hildebrandt Cotillard was a young man Mia held no particular feelings toward, neither good nor bad. In the previous timeline, the Cotillards never betrayed the throne. But it would be incorrect to assume that meant he took their side until the very end, fighting and dying together. Instead, his life had quietly and suddenly come to an end amid the civil unrest that broke out in his family's domain in the wake of the famine.

Putting an end to revolts was simply the job of a noble. While Mia of course felt some shock at the news of his death…the proceeding shocking events quickly erased the understandable death of her cousin to be nothing but a small smudge in her memories. To her, Hildebrandt was little more than a person she had met with occasionally during her childhood, meaning she had absolutely no idea what sort of man he had grown into.

For now, I need information. Hopefully that will leave me with a hint as to how I can stop this marriage.

Given that the engagement had been contrived purely of political advantage, it would be hard to put a stop to the conversations from that perspective. Duke Manzana Redmoon currently backed Mia and showed her favor, but that didn't mean that would continue despite anything she might do. Purposefully doing away with this show of respect might leave him soured, and he could even turn to count himself among her enemies. Preventing such an advantageous marriage without reason could even leave him doubting her competence.

That all meant that picking holes in the political aspects of this marriage would be difficult. Thus, finding fault with Hildebrandt—for example, in his character—seemed like the better option. *Ugh… This seems quite difficult as well. I'd like to avoid incurring his enmity if possible…*

What made this situation so difficult was the fact that everyone

was on Mia's side. An enemy could just be flung away with a full-force kick, but Hildebrandt was a family member, Ruby an ally, and Manzana a supporter. That meant that any kicks had to be careful ones.

Having to pay mind to so many sides was enough to give Mia a headache. *But...I must do my best for Ruby's sake!* Today, Mia was on top of her game. The more obstacles stood in their way, the more exciting the love story. Mia's heart had been set on fire by the passions of love. Ready for anything, she took a seat in their drawing room.

Just because it seems worth mentioning, Mia had of course changed her shoes. Mia's right-hand woman cut no corners in her preparations. As personal maid to the imperial princess, Anne was ready for anything that might befall her master.

Inside the room were Mia, Anne, Aima, and Abel. Hildebrandt once again addressed them. "I'd like to once more welcome you to the manor of the Cotillards, Your Highness."

"Thank you, Lord Hildebrandt. I suppose it would be odd to say it has been quite a while given our recent passing on my way home to Lunatear," she said with a smile before introducing Abel and Aima.

"Ah, so you are a Remno prince. Please excuse my insolence." He bowed his head deeply before showing a friendly smile. "I hear that Remno is a country of warriors. I am sure your prowess with a sword is nothing laughable."

"Well, I can only do my best." Abel's expression was stiff, perhaps due to his unfavorable first impression of the man.

Still, Hildebrandt paid it no mind and responded with a merry grin. "How intriguing. As a man of the Tearmoon military, I would greatly appreciate to see the swordsmanship of Remno firsthand, if given the opportunity."

"Yes... Of course..." The lack of malice in Hildebrandt's smile had completely taken him aback.

Hildebrandt now turned to Aima. "From your name, I take it you are from the Equestrian Kingdom?"

"Indeed. I am Ka Aima, the acting head of the Fire Clan. I have come as a guard for my friend, Princess Mia."

"So that you are! In that case, could the horse Her Highness was riding the other day be...?"

"Yes, he is my beloved Keilai."

Hildebrandt looked incredibly pleased by this. “I see! It was a truly brilliant horse. Can many similar ones be found in the Equestrian Kingdom?”

“Hm. Each clan has its own best steed. My Keilai is a moonhare among moonhares. There are few who can hold a candle to him.” Aima spoke these words proudly.

“I have actually been into horseback riding as of late. As a member of the cavalry, strengthening the bond between man and horse is a must. I have prepared our gardens to act as a training ground. I do hope you can share some of your knowledge,” he said with a handsome smile.

Mia couldn’t help but groan. *There are no holes to find at all! He’s a perfectly agreeable man! I was hoping to find some fault in his character, but this will be quite the tall order.*

Faced with a formidable opponent the likes she had never before seen, Mia’s battles as Cupid continued.

Chapter 20: The Return of Mia-First and the Divine Revelation of the Horse Dung

Mia remembered very little about Hildebrandt Cotillard, but there was one memory that left an indelible mark on her consciousness. Mia was still young, and she had run into Hildebrandt on a visit to Marquess Cotillard. In order to properly receive her, the marquess had prepared an especially delicious cake. Hildebrandt had shared it with her. He was five years her senior, but the moment the fluffy, white cake met his tongue, he exclaimed, "How outrageous! This cake is *too* delicious!" Then, he made a proclamation: "When I grow up, I shall be cake!"

Hearing this, Mia thought to herself, *I see. So he's a bit stupid. What a simpleton.*

While this event did not leave her with any particular feelings of like or dislike, it did leave her with the vague sense that he was a man who could be easily dealt with. Thus, the man before her now had thrown her for a loop. *He's…just a good person!*

His lively smile made Mia have to force hers. While his simple attitude that could hide nothing had remained, he had learned the proper ways of a noble, leaving nothing but a youth of infallible character in its wake.

This is troublesome… Hildebrandt has grown into a proper person! Wait, this marriage is starting to sound too *perfect for Ruby!*

He was someone who left no room for complaint as both a life partner and in the merits of political strategy. He was the perfect man for Duke Redmoon to choose as Ruby's partner, and it appeared that there were no issues that a little poking by Mia could bring to the surface.

"Let me once again express my gratitude for another matter. You have my deepest thanks for presenting me with such an amazing possible engagement." As Mia wondered just what he could be on about, Hildebrandt lowered his head. "I hear it was you

who tied the Cotillards and Redmoons together."

"Right... I didn't do anything of the sort, but are you really okay with these arrangements?"

"'Okay with'? What is there to complain about?"

"I'm sure you know that Ruby has her heart sent on riding up the ranks to the top of the Ebony Moon Ministry. Are you all right with that?" In principle, the noble women of Tearmoon had no hand in military affairs. Thus, Mia questioned him to see how he felt about an exception to that rule.

"Ha ha! She is quite the stubborn one, isn't she? Well, I would expect nothing less from the daughter of Duke Redmoon." He chuckled. "As I just mentioned, I've been focusing on my horsemanship skills as of late, and I find the sight of a woman on horseback simply striking. I have no misgivings about courageous visions of running the Ebony Moon Ministry, and I wish to do all in my power to support her in the endeavor. Duke Manzana has even promised me Skyred Hare. I plan to do all I can to not disappoint him in caring for his daughter."

His answer was textbook. *I-It's perfect! There's absolutely no reason to call off this betrothal!* The politics were great, his personality was great, and his heart was in exactly the right place. *He seems all for this marriage... I might not have any say in the matter.*

Before her, Mia saw a wall tall enough to reach the heavens. Scaling it would be a hefty task...and there was little reason to try in the first place. She felt like she was about to fall to her knees. *If Ruby could just give up on her love, everything would work out so perfectly...*

Now, Mia was thinking that having her confess her love so that Vanos could turn her down was the perfect solution. Brokenhearted, Hildebrandt would be there to comfort her. It was a perfect scene! In the first place, Mia's hope to see a love between a noble lady and a commoner that surpassed even age was her own selfishness. Ruby's love was so unbecoming of someone of her status that giving up on it was only natural. However... *That wouldn't be any fun.*

Having thought through all that, Mia was back at the beginning. *Her* beginning—the policy of Mia-first had made its return! In the end, Mia didn't want to see Ruby give up on her love due to something silly like what a noble *should* do. She wanted to witness a passionate love story that surmounted all difficulties!

Now that's *a scene that could make anyone's heart flutter! What I*

want is a happy end, and having relatives giving up on their loves because of me *just doesn't sit right...* Both her policy of Mia-first and her chicken heart made taking Ruby's side in this a necessity! *I mean, a passionate girl like Ruby and a reasonable man like Hildebrandt just wouldn't...*

"...You two just wouldn't suit each other."

Hildebrandt was a noble who faultlessly followed noble etiquette, and Ruby was a woman ready to throw it all the way for the sake of love. Mia just couldn't see the two of them together, as their values were too different. Mismatched passions would only lead to misery. *And then a marriage built to benefit* me *would end in misery! Everyone would think it was* me *who left their hearts broken!*

That was a truly bone-chilling thought. Mia just wanted to laze around in bed without incurring anyone's wrath. In Mia's ideal world, everyone would love her and just occasionally show up to bring her snacks. She didn't want to be on anyone's bad side, and this situation left her racking her brains on a way to make that true...

The situation was like a stagnant puddle, and in its waters, what she clung to was the divine message she had just received. *Horses... Yes, I can use horses...*

She had a moment of revelation—a divine revelation in the form of horse dung!

"And just what is that meant to mean?" Mia suddenly lifted her face to find Hildebrandt staring right at her. Despite his perfect character, there was a hint of anger in his eyes. "Do you not believe a horse such as a moonhare would suit me?"

"A horse...?" That keyword had made an appearance just when Mia had least expected it! She nodded. "Well, I suppose I don't..."

And just like that, the stagnant puddle began to flow into waves.

Chapter 21: Cake Shall Be Vegetable Cake!

"You don't?" he asked once again, looking for confirmation. Within his thick armor of noble etiquette was a chink, and it did not escape Mia's notice.

Now there's that look I remember! So he hasn't changed!

Moved by the greatness of a cake, he declared *not* that he would one day be a pastry chef, but cake itself. This simple, single-minded man was the true Hildebrandt Cotillard, and right now, the object of his passions was none other than...horses!

I can use this! With this conviction in mind, she nodded once again and began to think. Her brain was in full romance mode (fueled by sweets). *The object of his affection is Skyred Hare, a fine horse...wait, horse?!* Mia's eyes went wide. *That's it! To defend against overindulgence in cake, you replace cake with vegetable cake... You divert your attention!* Now Mia's mind was in sweets mode (fueled by romance). *If Hildebrandt's heart is set on the cake that is Skyred Hare, then I need to divert his attention with vegetable cake... That is, something that can act as a replacement. And if it's horses he's after, I think I can arrange that.*

Mia had already considered preparing a replacement for his affections moments earlier when Anne had aided her in changing her shoes.

"Anne... This is just a question, but if you were trying to drive a wedge in engagement talks between two nobles, what method would you choose?"

"Hm..." She tilted her head as she thought. "This is perhaps not a method befitting of you, milady, but I suppose I would try to present the man with an even more attractive woman."

"Ah... There *was* a chapter like that!" A chapter, of course, in a romance novel Anne and she had been giggling and gossiping about a few days prior. The villain—a young woman—contrived to get the

handsome prince of her affection as her own. She presented a man who she thought could be the prince's replacement to the main character, the prince's lover, in an attempt to tear them apart.

It is worth mentioning that the fate that awaited the villain at the end of the novel was decapitation at the guillotine, which left Mia shivering in fear. *Using a strategy like that would beckon disaster! I don't think I can use it...*

Picturing what would happen if she were to present Hildebrandt with another woman to lead him astray, thereby forcing the woman into a marriage with a partner she had little desire for, left her certain of that fact. A plan that would result in sacrificing some woman's future would never be overlooked by the likes of Rafina or Sion. She could practically hear the sound of the guillotine's falling blade reverberating in the air! Horse dung was one thing, but a guillotine was definitely not a trap Mia wanted to walk into... Actually, she didn't want to walk into horse dung either.

However, Anne shook her head. "That chapter had a bit of an unsavory ending, but...what if the woman was truly in love with Lord Hildebrandt?"

"I see. If she was a charming enough woman to seduce him, he might call off the engagement himself." If there was a woman who already had him in her heart, the situation would change. It would be a happy ending for everyone! Rafina would be smiling happily, and the guillotine would be averted. "But that won't work if there are no women out there who have him in their favor. I hope we can find one..."

Mia thought such a plan could not be put into immediate use, but if it was passion for horses they were talking about, then that made things different. Finding a replacement was certainly possible. Of course, that would *not* be another moonhare—such thinking was a slight to the people of the Equestrian Kingdom like her dear friends Aima and Xiaolei. Mia didn't want to do anything that could hurt the people she would need to rely on most should she ever need to run.

Still, presenting either Aima or Xiaolei as a possible bride would be an even bigger slight to them. Thus, she had something else in mind. *It's his passion for horseback riding that I can use!*

Mia calmly lifted her head. "That's right, Hildebrandt. I think

it's quite questionable that your skills on a horse are befitting of a moonhare," she said, purposefully trying to rile him up. Seeing the anger beginning to rise on his face, Mia gave a sweet smile to avoid its brunt. Hildebrandt wasn't an enemy, and this wasn't a fight. Thus, she put on a mischievous grin and said, "Skyred Hare is a wonderful steed that could brazenly be used for any task. Have you seen it for yourself? I once rode against it in a race."

"You did?"

"Yes, at Saint-Noel's Horsemanship Tournament. It was truly wonderful. The Redmoons have many fine horses, but Skyred Hare has to be their finest. I'm sure that is probably the reason you seek to marry Ruby, but rising to the level of a horse like that will be quite the feat." Mia lifted her hand to her cheek and let out a big sigh in a forced action that was obviously for show. "I'm sure Duke Manzana is quite worried himself. While he might have agreed to gift it to you, I'm sure he is praying that you will be able to ride Skyred Hare well. And I'm sure you already know, but this marriage was presented to you because you are related to *me*. Any shortcomings on your part will reflect poorly upon me, as well."

"Your words are true. But then, what is it I must do?" he asked, perplexed.

Mia smiled. "It is simple. You simply must demonstrate your skills to him by borrowing Skyred Hare and debuting in a race yourself."

Understanding finally made its way to his face. What he thought was this: Mia's words were half jest, and her proposal was really for a performance to celebrate their engagement. "I see. That does sound delightful, but can there truly be meaning to it if there is no horse that can hold its own to Skyred Hare?"

Mia grinned. In order to prove that Hildebrandt was indeed worthy of Skyred Hare by way of this competition, she would need a horse that would make a true opponent. In other words...

"In that case, why don't we leave it to Aima?"

She was shocked to suddenly find herself in the conversation. "To me?"

"Yes, to you and Keilai. I can think of no other pair that could rival Skyred Hare." Mia put a hand on Aima's shoulder.

"No, but... In that case, I believe it should be you who rides..."

But to Mia...that wouldn't be right. *While I do think my skills on a horse supersede Hildebrandt's...* She once again thought better of it

and shook her head despite that haughty assumption. It had to be an Equestri that forced Hildebrandt to utter defeat. There was no point in this unless someone from the Equestrian Kingdom displayed their advanced riding skills to him!

"Aima, you said you were in need of some exercise yourself. Plus...are you really okay with staying defeated by Tearmoon?" Mia egged her on!

"What...?" Aima scowled, but Mia only decided to lay it on thicker.

"I'm giving you a chance at revenge. Xiaolei, a noble lady of the Equestrian Kingdom, lost to me, Tearmoon's Princess, and now, I am giving you a chance to ride against my own cousin, Hildebrandt. As Xiaolei's friend, isn't this the perfect opportunity to get one over on a Tearmoon noble?"

For a moment, Aima was speechless. Then, a ferocious grin found its way on her face. "Your words are indeed true. It seems that being in a far-off land has made me timid. Even should it not be for revenge, there is nothing more prideful for an Equestri than a race of two swift steeds."

After confirming Aima's cooperation, Mia once again turned back to Hildebrandt. "So, how about you?" She asked him, who in response...

"That sounds like quite an intriguing proposal," he said with a ready-to-win grin.

Chapter 22: Horse Racing and Wheat Eating

"Oho! This was a perfect outcome!" After concluding discussions with Hildebrandt, Mia giggled to herself as she returned to the Whitemoon Palace. "He's such a simpleton! I'm sure the horsemanship skills of the Equestrian Kingdom will be enough to steal his heart!"

And if that was the case, he would be all in. He wasn't just going to summon an Equestri trainer—this was a man who after eating delicious cake declared he would become it. Thus, if he were to come face-to-face with the skills of an Equestri... "He'll want to become an Equestri himself!"

Of course, Mia didn't think he would really take it that far, but she did think, *If he were to meet a girl to his liking in the Equestrian Kingdom, everything would come to a happy end! But at the very least, I'm sure he'll want to study abroad there to learn their skills himself for a few years.*

That might have been delaying the inevitable...but when it came to this matter, Mia didn't care. If things could be put off, there would be time to advance talks of marriage between Ruby and Vanos. "It may be an issue if they decide they want to make their engagement official before he leaves for the Equestrian Kingdom, but...I can wheedle my way out of that! Oho ho! This will be easy!" Mia's grin was of the villainous kind. Seeing it from the shadows was enough to have Patty gulping in fear, but...Mia never noticed.

Thus, the following day, Mia summoned Ludwig to discuss the matter.

"A Horsemanship Tournament *now* of all times...?" After making the announcement immediately, even Ludwig couldn't help but be a bit perplexed. "My apologies for asking, but what scale did you have in mind?"

"Hm, nothing so big as deserving the name 'tournament,' just

some entertainment for those close to us. It's just..." Mia fell to silence. *I'll have to invite Duke Redmoon...which means my father may be present as well. That will require quite a number of guards. Hm...* Mia nodded. "I believe both Duke Redmoon and my father will be in attendance."

"Even His Imperial Majesty? I...see..." His face grew even graver. It was enough to have Mia doubting herself.

Well, if my father were to make an appearance, it would *require strict security. As of now, the Princess Guard is the only military force I can easily maneuver, but they're currently tasked with the protection of the shipment of provisions. Asking even more of them might make Ludwig angry...* Mia couldn't help but think, *That damn four-eyes!* in the back of her mind, and thus, she rushed to clarify herself. "Of course, there's no need to organize security. If my father decides to attend, the imperial guard should handle it." Her grin grew teasing. "While the Princess Guard cannot be completely free of duties, I'd like them to relax as much as they can... Consider this an opportunity for them to let off some steam." Mia made sure to appeal to the fact that this was nothing more than a breath of fresh air in consideration of the important tasks they were burdened with.

"A chance for them to let off some steam, is it? I was supposed to be the one in charge of making sure they get proper rest, but...it seems like I had turned a blind eye." His eyes were held open in wonder. He nodded. "Understood. I shall get to arranging the matter immediately," he proclaimed while pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Having received these orders, Ludwig immediately got to work. After procuring a grounds for the competition and organizing security, he took a break, and that's when Dion came to visit.

"Ha ha! Just what our little princess would think of. She gets right to the point." He laughed. "You gotta eat, rest, and relax. The centurion knows that well, but the imperial guards and Duke Redmoon's men rarely see real action. They're probably not very good at taking it easy."

Ludwig responded. "Eat and play... It is the ability to award those that makes a good ruler. Those are words spoken by Master Galv. For now, it is time for 'horse racing and wheat eating.' If Her Highness were to write a book on the art of guiding a people, I am certain that would be one of its touted slogans."

Food alone was not enough to make people healthy. Proper sleep failed at that task as well. Just as children must play, so must adults. The people needed entertainment that could alleviate their stress. Ludwig took a note to make sure he shared this with his buddies the next time they went drinking. Then, he pushed up his glasses and said, “Well, I am sure that is not her only aim. If she is inviting the strongest military force in the Empire, the Redmoons, and her father the Imperial Majesty, then...”

“She’s lookin’ to strengthen the cavalry. Shipping provisions throughout Tearmoon is quite a task in and of itself, but if that were to spread abroad? We’d be in need of men.”

“Her Highness also has connections with the Equestris. I assumed we would one day rely on them for aid, but...perhaps this is all preparation for the future.”

“In any case, I’m not leaving the little miss’s side. I’ve gotta know more about this man who bested the wolfmaster.”

Thus, the Horsemanship Tournament was becoming a reality, backed by the hopes of her loyal vassals.

Chapter 23: Somewhat of a Side Story —What the Princess Guard Was Up To

"Good grief..."

That evening, a squad out on expedition returned to the Princess Guard's offices. Currently, they were operating under a system that divided men into groups of ten, and depending on the number of goods being transported, squads would work by themselves or paired with another to protect shipments. The Empire was still relatively safe, and they were a set of elite forces. Thus, ten men alone proved enough for the job.

Yes, the Princess Guard had trained themselves to be completely and fully "elite forces." Even those of the imperial guard —who rarely saw themselves in real battles—had been trained by the former squad under Dion. In exchange, Dion's men learned manners from the imperial guard, meaning all soldiers now knew what it took to be a proper member of the princess's personal forces. While the two sides originally had their share of differences and altercations, Vanos had managed to unite the men under the shared pride of being Her Highness's shield.

Then, the female soldiers from Duke Redmoon had been added to the mix. While they lacked power, their skills with a sword were advanced, and their skills with a bow unrivaled, as Duke Redmoon had enlisted an instructor from the Lulu tribe to teach them. This made the Princess Guard an even greater balanced force. While they operated in squads of just ten, they undoubtedly had the strength to defend against mere bandits.

Perhaps that was the reason that they had yet to be victims of any attack, and all had returned with the same number of men they had departed as.

Ernst, a young soldier of such a squad, returned his horse to the stables with a sigh.

A mission is a mission until you've returned to Lunatear. You must

always be aware of the fact you are one of Her Highness's—the Great Sage of the Empire's—men.

One of his seniors had shared those words with him, and he faithfully thought them over as he looked back on his past expedition. "Yup... I think I did a good job this time too." He thought not just of his guard duties, but his discussions with the personal armies of other nobles and the way he comported himself in the villages they stopped in during the journey. Satisfied, he gave a vigorous nod.

"Ah, good work out there. Were there any issues?"

That's when someone suddenly called out to him. Her voice was clear and regal, and he turned around to find a young woman. "Oh, Miss Celes."

She was none other than the leader of the troops sent by the Redmoons, and as they had joined the Princess Guard at roughly the same time, they talked quite regularly. Ernst admired and adored her no-nonsense attitude and earnest work ethic. As their line of work was done at the risk of their life, it was easy to grow to like anyone who could be trusted to watch your back.

Ernst corrected his posture with a smile. "Not at all. Some of the others have been saying we're too on edge."

She scowled. "Do you share their opinions?"

He shook his head. "Nope. A scarcity of food is bound to disturb the public order. Our shipments being attacked is a real possibility." And if that were to happen, it would hinder the food supply, leading to famine that would only worsen the situation. It would be the start of a chain of misfortunes. Having a part in it himself, Ernst knew the situation couldn't be taken lightly. Should a boulder begin to fall down a mountain path, there was little that could be done to stop it. Thus, it was necessary to take the precautions necessary to keep the boulder where it was before it started to roll. "Being on edge is what's going to get us through this with as little effort as possible in the end."

Celes nodded. "I agree, and I believe Her Highness does as well." She again scowled as she crossed her arms. "But there is one thing I don't understand: Her Highness actually came to visit us recently..."

"You mean she came to the barracks?" He couldn't hide his surprise, and Celes nodded to affirm her words. "I just missed her...I was meaning to ask her why she sent me here. What did she come

to do?"

"To observe us and applaud us for our work, I suppose. She treats even commoners with a kind heart, after all." Remembering her appearance at the barracks brought a grin to Celes's face. "Well, anyway... Soon after, Ludwig, her right-hand man, came to visit as well, saying that there was to be a Horsemanship Tournament put on under her orders. He came to discuss security at the event."

"A-A Horsemanship Tournament? I agree...it doesn't quite seem to make sense that she would organize something like that at a time like this." Ernst couldn't help but think it was naive of her to think of horse races under such critical circumstances. "Just what could she be thinking...?"

The two could only stare at each other, but then...

"You do not understand?" It was the man who cared for the stables, Gorka. He was the caretaker of the Princess Guard's horses, and he had even accompanied Mia on her trip to the Equestrian Kingdom. He was usually a quiet, reticent man with a cranky frown, but a slight grin was his current expression. "It is just as you stated, Miss Celes. She means to applaud our efforts with a reward. She is a considerate young woman."

"This is meant as a reward? Holding such an event would require us to be in charge of its security, no?" asked Ernst, thinking that the idea would only increase their workload.

Gorka shook his head. "Resting the body is not the only way to rest. Unlike weariness of the body, weariness of the soul is much harder to recover."

The civil officials who had been sent to the Princess Guard were of incredible talent. They knew well that exhaustion would increase mistakes, and thus, they had planned things so that the soldiers would be able to take proper rest. However, that didn't change the danger they faced. Knowing that, the men could hardly rest their minds.

"I am sure that by offering us this Horsemanship Tournament, Her Highness is trying to heal our hearts and minds, especially those as upright and stressed as yourself, Ernst." Gorka clapped him on his shoulder. "You were not with us in the Equestrian Kingdom, but Her Highness's feats in the Matching of Steeds were glorious. Anyone who looks at horses fondly could not help their excitement at such a scene." He narrowed his eyes as if he were watching it over again. "I believe Her Highness herself will most likely make an

appearance in the tournament. How excited I am to see her on horseback once again...”

Once more, faith in and expectations of Mia had been rising to extreme heights behind her back, but...well, that was normal.

Chapter 24: Mia Awakens to the Soul of an Entertainer!

Today, Mia ate her breakfast in peace. While licking her lips at the dishes prepared by the head chef, she eloquently told off the children (Patty, Kiryl, Yanna, and Bel) for being picky. Having pompously given them a scolding, Mia was left in a good mood. This time spent was truly fulfilling. However, when she returned to her room, both Ludwig and Gorka, the Princess Guard's stableman, were waiting for her.

"My, what brings the two of you here?" While Ludwig made frequent visits, Mia wondered what business Gorka could have as she enjoyed the scent of some black tea.

Gorka reverently lowered his head. "What horse shall you ride, Your Highness?"

"Hm? Me?" She gave him a blank stare, unable to make heads or tails of the discussion. Since when was *she* going to participate in the Horsemanship Tournament? Her only aim in suggesting the event was to show Hildebrandt the skills of the Equestris, and thus, the only participants were to be Hildebrandt and Aima. There shouldn't be any talks about her participating at all! So why had he come to ask this?

After a moment to think, Mia came to a realization. "Ah... Yes, I will have to participate, won't I?"

The reason was simple: Emperor Matthias would be watching the event. Her father would never stand not getting to see his dear daughter on horseback if she were to be holding a Horsemanship Tournament. In truth, Mia didn't really care if her father came to see it or not, but...holding such an event in Lunatear, especially with Mia involved, meant that her father's audience was a given. If Duke Redmoon were to be there—which he had to be—her father would certainly come to her grumbling about how unfair it was that Duke Redmoon alone was allowed to go watch. Thus, Mia had no choice but to participate in the events herself.

I suppose it wouldn't be too interesting if it was just Aima and Hildebrandt anyway. If they were going to summon Duke Redmoon, Mia wanted to do a proper job of entertaining him. Manzana Redmoon was plainly announcing his support for Mia with the betrothal, making him her supporter, comrade, and benefactor. Mia couldn't help but feel a little guilty at attempting to undermine his goodwill, and thus, she was set on making the tournament worth his time.

"I see... In that case, why don't we recruit participants from the Redmoons' personal forces and the Princess Guard as well? While we certainly couldn't make it a completely open call for security's sake, I'm sure that the Redmoons have some skilled riders, given the strength of their army." Her arms had been crossed, but she now clapped them. "That's it! Why not divide them into groups of east versus west and have them compete?"

"A group competition, you mean?"

"Yes, of course." Mia recalled her Fight of the Ten Sweets—her own evil scheme which had come to light just a few days prior. During this year's party to celebrate the friendship between Tearmoon and Perujin, Mia wanted to bring sweets from each country to compare them. However...when Tatiana had visited and caught sight of the plan, it had been brought to a standstill.

"Miss Mia...eating all this would be bad for your health," she had said, awfully seriously.

Yes, Mia's plan had been one of near insanity, but anyway...putting together the plan had left Mia thinking, *Having each dish compete with one another is sure to rile up the crowd!* And thus, Mia had made this proposal for the Horsemanship Tournament as a way of reusing that plan.

"If the audience were to each have a side they would be rooting for in advance, it's sure to get them excited...and it could be fun to have different sorts of competitions as well. We won't just have races, but other battles that can show off the skills of the riders." With that, it would be crucial to ignite Hildebrandt's passion for horses to the next degree. "I don't mind appearing for a short time at the end, and I see no reason for that to be a race."

Mia wanted to get out of this with just some brief time on horseback. A whole race would be awfully tiring, and her father wouldn't be able to look the other way if she lost. It would require quite the coaxing and pacifying on *her* end to protect her victorious

opponent, and that just sounded like a pain.

Well, her opponent might have the proper mind to let her win, but that wouldn't sit quite right either.

"I see. Events in addition to races, is it? In that case, I will look into what we can use from their normal training regimens," said Ludwig with a nod.

Gorka, on the other hand, asked, "Would it be all right to assume you will once again be riding Dongfeng, Your Highness?"

"Yes, thank you, Gorka." Mia nodded, and all of a sudden, riding attire flashed through her mind. And not just *any* riding attire...shoes, to be exact. After stepping in the offending substance, her boots had been cleansed. Thus, they posed no issues, but... *Abel promised to buy me a new pair, and I'd like to see what newer options there are, but...being the one to bring it up wouldn't be very ladylike, would it?*

However, there was one who watched over Mia in her time of troubles: her right-hand maid with a reputation for taking matters into her own hands had secretly put herself into action.

Chapter 25: Mia, in Romance Mode, Makes an Impassioned Speech

After Ludwig and Gorka had left her quarters, Mia let out a small sigh. “It looks like things just got a bit more difficult for me... Well, all I have to do is show up on a horse, so that shouldn’t be too hard, but... Hm? Wait, where’s Anne?” Mia naively assumed she had gone off to prepare some more snacks when there was a knock at the door.

“Ah, Your Highness. This is where you were.” It was Ruby, and she looked awfully pale.

“My, Ruby! Is something the matter?”

“No, but...Lord Hildebrandt just came to talk with my father...”

Mia couldn’t help but laugh at how fast those words came out of her mouth. “I see Hildebrandt works quickly. So he’s already made his move...”

“Um... Would you mind explaining what’s going on?” asked Ruby, utterly confused.

Mia smiled at her. “You have nothing to worry about. This is all going to plan.” She nodded, quite pleased with herself. *Hmph... Well, it may be all according to plan, and I don’t mind meddling in this case, but...I do hope she doesn’t just continue to rely on me for every issue that comes up.* Mia couldn’t help that thought, but it was not for the sake of *Ruby’s* growth, but for the fact all Mia wanted to do was laze around. *But that isn’t quite true either.* Well then, Mia, just what is it, then? *It’s no fun when the road ahead is set in stone! The leading characters have to catch the author and readers by surprise!*

Yes, Mia was a lover of romance novels, and she was enjoying this May-December romance between one of the most distinguished noble ladies in Tearmoon and a commoner from the bottom of her heart! *I’m perfectly willing to help Ruby, but I don’t want things to just work out as I will them to either. This matter might be the catalyst for Ruby to do something spontaneous!*

Mia nodded to herself before turning serious. “But yes... All I

am doing is delaying the inevitable. Please do not forget that."

"Which means...?"

Ruby's expression was grave, and Mia tried to address her as kindly as possible. "Isn't it obvious? You're the daughter of Duke Redmoon. You can't run from marriage proposals forever." Given her expression, it was clear that Ruby had yet to consider this. "This current proposal is quite a good one too. Any others that come your way will surely pale in comparison. That's just how good Hildebrandt is for you." After slightly exaggerating his character, Mia looked Ruby straight in the eyes. "To put an end to such talks means nothing unless your precious love comes true one day." She clenched her fists and gave an impassioned speech. Her brain was more set in romance mode than it ever had been, and it brought enthusiasm to her words. But in the middle of that passionate speech, Mia suddenly came to her senses.

Wait. I might have taken that too far.

She had gotten so enraptured in her speech that her words were tumbling feet only growing faster as they ran further downhill and eventually straight into Ruby's back. Still, she didn't have time for regrets. She had to just declare it with utter confidence, and thus, those tumbling feet grew even faster. She looked straight into Ruby's eyes and said, "You need to take your fate into your own hands."

"My fate..." She scowled. "Like I did when we raced off together?" she asked with a gulp.

All Mia could do was bring her hand to her face and think... "When we raced off... Ah... Right. The Horsemanship Tournament. Well, yes, just like that..."

Mia nodded and thought, *Back then, she risked her sword to fight for what was most important to her.* For the Redmoons, one's sword surmounted in importance to one's life. Thus, Ruby was saying she would take this matter into her own hands with the same resolve. Mia looked at her own hands and thought, *Maybe I'm pushing her too hard.*

"Miss Mia?"

"W-Well, in any case, leave Hildebrandt to me. But in return, you must take the necessary steps toward your future with Vanos." Her expression softened. "I don't mind if that's just a small step either; there is no need to push yourself too hard," she added, trying to bring back the intensity of her words. She was trying to

tell Ruby that there's no need to go in too gung-ho, but...

Ruby looked at Mia calmly. "Thank you. I think I've had a breakthrough."

Now, something was broken. This put Mia in a bit of unease, but she decided not to lead her on any further, instead bringing the conversation to a practical finish. "By the way, I believe Ludwig should be visiting you soon. I was hoping the competition I'm planning wouldn't just be Aima and Hildebrandt, but also feature riders from both the Princess Guard and the Redmoons' forces. The details are here..." Mia pulled out a piece of paper. It was the outline of the tournament she had Ludwig write up, but she presented it like it was *her* who had done all the work.

"I see. I think having candidates nominate themselves could boost morale. It may also be good to feature not just horsemanship, but archery, martial arts, and swordsmanship as well. Horses aren't the only thing you need on the battlefield."

After nodding through Ruby's suggestions, the conversation finally came to an end and Ruby left. But now, it was Anne who entered.

"My, where have you been? Hm...?" Mia couldn't help but tilt her head in question seeing the person who followed her in.

"Hey, Mia." Behind her was Abel, wearing his usual dashing grin.

Chapter 26: Aima Reads the Room

"Good morning, Abel. Did you already finish breakfast?"

"Yup. Just a moment ago, Miss Bel and her friends came to..." He grimaced. "I guess it's strange to call my own granddaughter 'miss,' but it's hard to know just what to call her. In any case, I heard that you'll be making an appearance in the competition between Lord Hildebrandt and Aima. Is that true, Mia?"

"It is. I was planning for it to be a simple race between Aima and Hildebrandt, but it just keeps growing larger in scope...now, I'm to appear on horseback right at the end."

"I see. In that case, I'll have to get you those boots I promised," he said with a merry smile.

Hearing this, Mia couldn't help but glance over at her loyal maid. *My, did you tell him the news so he would invite me out, Anne?* She asked this question with her eyes, but Anne played ignorant and averted her own as if responding, *Hm? I know nothing of the sort.*

Oho ho! If it were any other maid I'd assume she was up to no good, but it seems that Anne tries to hide the good she's done too! Mia mouthed a "thank you" to her and once again looked back to Abel.

"I was planning on hiring a Remno artisan for the task, but"—he scowled—"if there are any good ones in Tearmoon, I would appreciate an introduction."

"Hm..." Mia took a moment to think. Mia was basically the princess of Tearmoon... Well, she actually *was* the princess of Tearmoon. There was no doubting the fact, but it is easy to forget without the occasional reminder, so just once again for complete clarity, she *is* the princess of Tearmoon. That meant she was of the upper echelon, making it incredibly rare for her to go out into town to purchase dresses, shoes, and the like. In principle, she would summon artisans and merchants to prepare all her clothes custom-made. However...

Inviting an artisan to the castle to make something for me and then just having Abel pay for it doesn't seem like much fun at all. Mia

recalled the times she spent shopping in the streets of Saint-Noel with Anne and the times she spent in the Cotillard domain looking for the best clothes she could find. It was quite fun to go shopping, especially when that was with your crush—it was a situation longed for by young women from all over! She wanted nothing more than to hide her status as princess and go out into town with the man of her dreams, having a date in the town center, enjoying some tea in a café, and getting all worked up about the statue of the saint of truth rumored to bite all who lie.

Thus, Mia resorted to begging with puppy-eyes. “It’s rare we get the chance. Why don’t we go out on the town for a date? Could I get you to prepare some guards for us, Anne?” Mia made a snap decision with a grin, and if that was the decision, she would need to prepare protection.

“Understood, milady!” Anne moved swiftly. Hearing the word “date” put her into action! She made like the wind out of the room, and after a very short while, someone appeared at the door...

“Princess Mia. I hear you are about to go into town.” It was Aima.

“My, how did you hear that, Aima?” Mia looked at her, puzzled.

Aima, in response, gave her a triumphant grin. “I overheard Anne.” She puffed out her chest and proudly stated that she had been eavesdropping. Today, she wore an Equestri dress, and her expression was firm. “Kunlou, or the man who bested my brother, may be in town. I wish that you take me as one of your guards,” she proclaimed.

“I heard you’re about to head out, princess.” The voice had Aima jumping into the air. “And if it isn’t Prince Abel and Miss Aima of the Fire Clan.” The man who appeared with a grin was none other than the Empire’s Finest, Dion Alaia.

“My, Dion! Did you need something?” asked Mia.

He shrugged. “Nope. But the Princess Guard’s been busy. I thought I’d take your protection upon myself this time.”

“I see... Oho! If I have you to protect me, I’ll have nothing to fear.” Mia smiled at him. While Dion had once been the object of her greatest fears, countless experiences had begun to change her view. In other words... *I doubt even Dion would attack without any warning! He’s like a guillotine whose blade makes no sudden falls. I just need to make sure I catch sight of those warnings and be on the lookout*

if he begins to make a face that says, "I don't care who—I've just gotta cut someone down!" Mia took a good look at his face. *And that doesn't seem to be the case today!* She had made her judgment, despite the utter lack of grounds to make that judgment on.

Aima, on the other hand...had frozen her expression and was gradually making her retreat. "Ah, that is right. I must prepare for the race. Yes. I am sure that Dion Alaia will prove a worthy guard. Indeed..."

Reading the fact that there was no room for her if Dion Alaia was there from the air, she quickly fled the scene.

Chapter 27: Princess Mia Loves “Normality”

Mia and Abel were soon off to town in a carriage, Anne and Dion in tow. Mia was watching the scenes unfolding outside the carriage for no particular reason when Anne addressed her. “What is it, milady?”

“Hm? What is what?”

“You just...seemed so pleased.”

“Pleased?” Mia tilted her head. “Yes, I suppose I was.” She gave a quiet nod as she watched the people going about the town.

After stopping by an inn to change into a dress that wouldn't attract attention, her much-awaited walk around town began.

"Oho ho! Lunatear is just the same as always. It's bustling and full of life!" said Mia.

She had thought as much from inside the carriage, but feeling the warm wind on her skin once again brought her back to that thought. Many types of wind blew in town—that heated with the excitement of a festival, that calm and frozen over by the winter when there were few on the streets, and even that charged with the undercurrents of revolution. However, the wind now, while serene, did not lack luster and smelled just like the Lunatear she had always known and loved. It was a fact that brought her joy.

"Is that disappointment I hear? Upset that no change at all means no change for the better?" asked Dion in a teasing—or perhaps testing—tone.

Mia looked at him to answer, but suddenly, a woman leading a young child by the hand entered her vision and she was back in memories long past.

Something slammed and cracked against her head. Its dripping contents left her hair sticky and smelled of rot. Mia was so shocked she could only stand still, and an uproarious outcry made its way to her ears.

"My child *died* because of *you*! Those are the eggs I had to feed them!" Her eyes were bloodshot, and...

In the previous timeline, that experience had put an end to her walks in the capital, for the city had grown so vicious that no number of guards could prove sufficient to keep her safe. Unlike the rotten air of back then, the air that flowed through Lunatear now was what she had always remembered—a kind air that wrapped her in warmth. And how nice it was...

Has that mother lost her child? I sure hope not...

Mia made a silent prayer in their name before answering Dion. "Not at all, for I know how much work is protecting what defines the normal here."

As far as Mia knew, there was no pestilence plaguing the town. While there were whispers of a dearth in food, each was met and

dealt with through provisions provided from the country's stockpiles. There was no famine, nor the revolts that accompanied it, and Mia knew that was all thanks to the efforts of the Princess Guard and the others involved in the food supply.

So, it was *important for the people to believe that even if they lacked food, the crown would be there to help them.* She recalled words the stupid four-eyes—ahem, Ludwig—had once told her.

"Your job, Your Highness, is to reinstate trust in an emperor that has lost it."

He had told her those words over and over again, often along with the somewhat superfluous addition of, "Or rather, that is all that you can do."

She refuted them with a grumble, saying, "B-But even if we do regain the people's trust, there's no food to give them. Would that really mean anything?"

"Well, at the very least, you could slow the speed at which the situation worsened." He shrugged. "Should the people believe that help would come should they wait, they would be able to bear the pain. However, if they have lost all hope in aid ever coming to their doors...they will take matters into their own hands."

"Into their own hands?"

"Yes. They will attack nobles and merchants to steal *their* foodstuffs. The flames of their battles will at times raze the fields, interrupt shipments, and create even more victims... The effect of which will only further hurt the food supply."

"So things would only be worse! What a negative cycle..."

"And to avoid that cycle, we must restore trust in the crown and reinstate our supply of food to the public in what little capacity we can manage," he said with a scowl, but...their efforts never came to fruition, for restoring a normality which had once crumpled to dust was outside the means of even the stupid four-eyes.

Mia spun her words from her heart, backed by those bitter memories. "I take pride in the 'normal.' There is nothing I treasure more than that mother being able to laugh with her precious child just as she always has."

As long as they were busy smiling, the mother would not be pelting her with any rotten eggs, just as the blade of a guillotine does not fall suddenly, nor does the blade of Dion Alaia. Mia knew with her whole being that protecting this normal was the key to a

path that didn't end with a guillotine.

"Treasuring the normal, hm?" Abel looked around in silence. "So, this is the future you're after..." he muttered.

Mia gave him a curious glance. "What is it, Abel?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought it was awfully like you, Mia. You really are none other than you."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" she asked, puzzled. However, when she saw Anne and Dion nodding as if they were in complete agreement, she only grew more confused.

Chapter 28: New Shoes and an Unsettling Presence

The group had come to the Newmoon District. While once the slums, it was now the most bustling district in Lunatear. In a corner, a large building that seemed to be the size of five or six regular shops stood out against the surroundings.

"Where are we, Mia?" asked Abel as he looked up at the building in wonder.

Mia flashed him a playful grin. "A friend of mine owns this shop. Let's hurry inside." She rushed forward with no hesitation, stepping inside the building.

"My, if it isn't Her Highness! Welcome."

Mia grinned at the man who had come to greet them. "Is Shalloak here?"

Yes, this was none other than the Lunatear branch operating under the great merchant Shalloak Cornrogue. Women's riding boots were a niche market in Tearmoon considering the female population's disregard for the sport. While they might have been common fare in the Equestrian Kingdom, there were so few customers after the product in Tearmoon that they were usually bought made-to-order straight from a merchant. There was not enough business to keep them on shelf, thus making Mia's current shopping trip quite a foolhardy endeavor.

However, it was thanks to this very shop that she had been able to make the expedition, for when Shalloak had opened the business, he had told her, "I'll prepare all the goods needed to stay in your favor, Your Highness. Riding gear is hard to come by, but I'll be sure to keep it on hand. Let me know whenever you come by, and if you could, please let the other noble girls in town know about us too..."

Shalloak's impetus for setting up this shop was undoubtedly to keep up good relations with Mia...probably with her intense popularity in mind. A shop frequented by Mia was a reputation that

could bring in the money, and while he had pledged allegiance to Mia, that was one thing, and the mercantile advantages was another.

In fact, Mia found his astuteness reliable. *Oho! Now* this *is the Shalloak Cornrogue I know!*

While chatting with the shop manager, Mia took a moment to introduce Abel. “This is Prince Abel. He promised to buy me some riding boots, so I brought him with me. I do hope you have some nice ones in stock.”

“Yes, of course. I shall prepare them immediately.”

As they watched the manager disappear into the shop, Abel nodded in wonder. “You really are great at finding allies. With your brains, it may even be possible to forge connections with every ruler in the continent.”

“Oho! You really do think too much of me, Abel. All I did to befriend Shalloak was eat a tasty meal in Perujin and dance a little.” She grinned from ear to ear.

The manager reappeared with three clerks in tow, each carrying a mountain of boxes. From them, they pulled out the shoes and displayed them before her.

“Moons, there are so many...” Mia was impressed by the line of products now spread before her. There had to be no fewer than fifty pairs, all of which differed slightly in design and color—not a single two pairs were the same.

“And they are all my size?”

“Yes, we keep various items in your sizes under orders from Master Shalloak. Adjustments can also be made if necessary.”

“Ordered like a true Merchant King...” Mia muttered with crossed arms.

Abel flashed her a strained grin. “Now that they’re here, why don’t you try them on? Riding makes heavy use of your ankles. You should find a pair that allows you to move them as freely as you can.”

“Yes, you’re right. It’s not just about the design. Anne, could I borrow you for a moment?”

“Certainty, milady.” Thanks to having love on the brain, Anne’s movements were fifty percent speedier than usual.

Helped by her maid, Mia tried on each pair to test out how they felt on her feet. She also made sure to twist her ankles for good

measure. “This pair is easy to move in. What do you think, Abel?”

“Hm...” He crossed his arms and gazed at her. He took a step backward for an even better look. “Yes, I think this design shows off your beauty excellently.”

“My! You always know just what to say, Abel!” His words flung Mia over the moon, and she skipped around in glee.

“Then how about this pair?” she asked, having changed her shoes and showing off her beautiful step work.

“I like them. I think you could use this pair for dancing as well. Your step work is stunning.”

“You’re such a flirt, Abel! You won’t get anything in return for praising me, you know!” She grinned from ear to ear. Her body was light as a feather, and it took her straight up to the moon. “Then how about this pair?”

“Hah! They all look like the best pair of shoes in the world when they’re on you. It’s hard to make a choice.”

“Aw, Abel, you’re so sweet!”

Love filled the air between this flirting couple, and dreadfully, none present put a stop to it. Both the clerks and Anne watched their young love from the sidelines with kind smiles.

“Good grief, this ain’t the place for me...” Dion Alaia excused himself from the store with a wry grin.

“Hm? Where are you off to, Sir Dion?” asked Anne.

He shrugged. “Oh, I could just feel the bile rising up in my— Never mind. I’m gonna go check the perimeter. Let me know if you need me.” With that, he stepped outside.

Their shopping date from heaven now over, Mia left the store with her cheeks flushed red. “Thank you, Abel. The pair you picked is wonderful,” she said with a giggle. Having obtained her new boots, she couldn’t help but hum.

Seeing her so happy put a kind smile on Abel’s face. “I’m glad you like them.”

Suddenly, Abel gazed at Mia and wrapped his arms around her shoulders in less time than it took to breathe!

“H-Huh? A-Abel? What are you...?” The suddenness had put Mia in a bubbling panic. However, Abel paid her no mind, tugging on Anne’s arm as well.

“Eek!”

These were quite the forceful actions for Abel’s standards, and

with both master and servant now in his hands, he looked toward Dion.

“Sir Dion, did you—?!” He looked around them, his eyes lowered into a scowl.

Impressed, Dion nodded. “Yup. You noticed, eh? You’re nothing to laugh at, Prince Abel. Don’t worry; there shouldn’t be any arrows flying at us,” he said nonchalantly. “Someone out for us was definitely here. I was certain they were gonna shoot at us, but...seems like they just left.”

Abel’s eyes opened in shock. “Are you sure, Sir Dion? What did they look like?”

“Dunno. This is just a guess, but I don’t think they were planning on attacking us out of nowhere. Maybe they knew there was no besting me in a fight, or maybe they’ve got other plans...” He let the air out of his nose. “They’re gone now, in any case. As things stand, I don’t think there’ll be any more problems if I take you lot back to the Whitemoon Palace.” He looked around with feral eyes as if to intimidate their enemies. “Well, if they do attack, I’ll just enjoy swinging my blade. It’s been a while.” With that, he laughed.

Mia looked at him and couldn’t help the goose bumps that formed on her skin. *It’s a good thing Aima didn’t come with us. Seeing that expression on Dion would keep her up for days!*

She worried sincerely for her dear friend.

Chapter 29: I'm Not Trying to Flaunt, You Know?

Having returned to her room, Mia displayed her new boots right beside her pillow. The brand-new scent, cute design, and the fact that they had been a gift from Abel brought stars to her eyes. Now placed beside her bed, Mia stared at them and giggled. "They're wonderful! Gorgeous! Absolutely stupendous!"

She flung herself on the bed, turning on her side to once again look at the boots. She hummed to herself and kicked her feet in the air. "Tee hee! A present from Abel! He has impeccable taste!" Warmth swelled in her chest as she remembered the serious face he had worn when making his decision. She grinned to herself about it before dinner, after her bath, and before bed. She even grinned herself to sleep that night.

This unnatural smile inspired some fear in Patty, but that can be ignored.

The next day—after she had spent so long admiring them—she finally decided to try them on. She tied the laces, and not only did they fit perfectly on her feet, but the tanned leather was also both durable and comfortable. "Just as I thought, these feel wonderful!"

She tested them out by walking through the room, jumping into the air, and trying some dance moves. They adjusted to her feet as if she had been wearing them for years.

"Oho! This is excellent. Ah, that's right!" She clapped her hands. "I need to practice for the Horsemanship Tournament."

Mia was the type who wanted to wear her new clothes immediately or take out a new umbrella as soon as possible, longing for the rain to make that wish come true. If she was given a fork, she wanted to eat some cake as soon as possible! Well, Mia was always ready for some cake, but in any case, she wanted to try out her new riding boots on horseback immediately. She was an incredibly simple young woman.

"I want to go riding, but just where to...?" Of course, she wasn't

about to suggest going on a long ride outside the capital given the hostile enemy Dion had sensed the day before, and she didn't want to inconvenience her guards either. She was looking for somewhere she could be to and back in an instant, which left...

"The garden of the Cotillards... That would be delightful." They would be unable to refuse the princess, and Hildebrandt was a genuine horse lover; he was unlikely to turn down a sister in equestrian arms. "Yes... I think I'll invite the children along as well..."

She was so proud of herself she couldn't help but grin. While perhaps obvious, this was not to show off her skills. Absolutely nothing of the sort. She was simply worried that the children had grown bored. Being inside the castle all day couldn't be too entertaining, in which case, it would be best to invite them to see her riding! Or rather, see her new boots. They'd tell her how jealous they were. That's all. She had no intention of basking in her own glory; this was a simple act of kindness! She wasn't flaunting anything—stop questioning that!

Thus, Mia hurried off to find Patty.

The three children were currently in the Whitemoon Palace's Grand Library, along with Bel and Citrina. Even Elise was with them.

"My, it's rare to see Elise with you five! What were you doing here?"

"Ah, Gr—Miss Mia! I thought the kids might be bored, so I brought them to Elise for some stories," said Bel with a smile.

"What kind of stories?"

"Grand stories of your many accomplishments!"

"My...accomplishments...?" Mia glanced at Elise, who nodded obediently.

"I was telling them all about your great achievements in every detail."

Mia didn't quite like the sound of this.

"Elise was just telling us that..." Bel put a finger on her lips and pondered. "Well, that you're really good at dancing, I guess."

"Dancing? Well, in that case..." Mia was quite confident in her skills on the dance floor. Even should Elise exaggerate and say she was one of the best on the continent, that wouldn't be too far off. *It's true, after all! If that's all she's telling them, then...* Mia decided to

let it go.

She then noticed a light in Yanna and Kiryl's eyes, and while Patty was as expressionless as always, a careful look revealed that just for a moment, she had gulped. *I suppose I should assume that this is all a sign that they've awakened to new respect for me... In any case, they're definitely not thinking anything negative.*

"But just what brings you here, Your Highness?" asked Elise.

Mia grinned. "Ah, that's right. I was thinking I'd go horseback riding and wanted to see if the younger ones would like to accompany me."

At this time, Mia failed to realize what her grandmother learning of her dancing prowess would mean for her, as the actions Patty would take when returning to the past were beyond Mia's imagination.

Chapter 30: The Unknowable Secret of Dancing Lessons

For now, we slightly rewind the clock.

"Ugh..."

Bel began her morning with a groan. Lying in bed propped up on her elbows, she furrowed her brow and groaned over and over in distraught, holding her head in her hands as she read over Ludwig's diary. "He didn't write anything about this! What could it mean?"

"Are you all right, Bel?" Citrina looked at her in worry. While Citrina had been told a room would be prepared for her...she had contrived the situation. She now would be sharing a room with her best friend, a decision reached through making full display of the negotiation strategies cultivated by the Yellowmoons for generations.

Bel, too, had been ready to enjoy her summer to the fullest and was glad to share her quarters, but...at the same time, it left her feeling a bit troubled. *Maybe Rina hasn't gotten over the shock of losing me yet...*

She couldn't help those thoughts. Every morning when she would wake up, Citrina would be staring at her in worry. Thinking about it now, she was also concerned that Citrina's decision to marry Dion was also rooted in her anxiety about Bel. *Did she want to make sure she had the power to protect me so I couldn't die again?*

Yes, those were thoughts often on her mind.

"Bel?" Citrina glanced at her with a tilted head.

Bel put on a smile. "It's nothing! I was just wondering what I'm supposed to do here..."

Bel returned her attention to the issue at hand. All hopes were on her to succeed the throne of Empress Mia. Seeing her policies as firsthand as could be would boost her authority and influence above any other experience life could give. Those around her knew she would one day be thrust into the past, and they all believed she would one day serve as empress in Mia's place. Thus, her time

traveling was supposed to be little more than a study abroad experience (though she was more of an interdimensional student than an international one). Bel had come here thinking it would be a vacation where she could see her grandmother's work with her own eyes, but...

"I didn't think there was a real reason for me slipping back in time..."

The truth had suddenly become apparent, and it shocked her, flinging her into a rush to find a hint as to what that reason could be. "I thought Professor Ludwig would have written something in his diary, but..."

His journal was an effective record of observable worlds. Knowing that the Princess Chronicles had been rewritten as the timeline changed, he predicted that his own writings could easily meet a similar fate, combating this by writing not only real events, but those of dreams. With that, he hypothesized that even should another timeline take over, the events leading to that change would be recorded in the form of a dream diary. However...

"There's nothing about me! Hm... I thought Professor Ludwig would've written me a hint or something. He really is tough on his students..."

Should Mia have heard this statement, she would have certainly boiled over and yelled, "What do you mean 'tough'?! All he does is spoil you!" Still, Bel paid no mind as she racked her brains.

"Hm... If I'm here to do something, could it be Grandmother Patricia? That would make sense... For now, getting close to Grandmother Patricia—I mean, Patty—should be my first priority!"

Bel's return to the future would be a final farewell to Patty, as their meeting was only possible through their simultaneous trips through time to the same destination. Bel's detective senses were picking up on the scent of a hint.

"So, if that's decided...will you play with the kids with me, Rina?"

"Rina's happy to play with you and the others, but what are we going to play?"

"Hm..." She tilted her head and pondered. "Ah! I think Moth—Elise should be working in the library now. She might be able to tell us some good stories!" Bel's favorite pastime had once been reading the stories written by Elise, and the Bel of today felt exactly the same. "Let's hurry and gather the others!" she said, leaping from

her bed and dashing out of the room.

A corner of the Grand Library in the Whitemoon Palace was the workplace of Princess Mia's court author, Elise Littstein. It had easily fallen into her hands with a single utterance from Mia. "Surely you need to look up many things while writing, so this space is yours!" she had said. However, it was quite a large space for a single person.

In truth, Mia had prepared the space thinking it would come in handy should the worst happen and the whole Littstein family need to be evacuated to the castle. During the times Mia was in the capital, she could easily order the imperial guard to complete this task, but her orders would not make it in time when she was at Saint-Noel's. Thus, she made sure the family could always use visiting Elise as a pretext for entering the palace.

Anyway, some sudden visitors had come to find her there. "Um... Miss Bel? What is this?"

With Commander Bel at their helm—and Citrina, the true person in charge as their lead—Patty, Yanna, and Kiryl had entered the library, their eyes swimming around in wonderment at its size.

"Hi, Moth—Elise! The kids were bored, so I thought you might have some stories for them!"

"Stories? There *are* a lot of books here, but..." Elise couldn't quite follow. There were few books in the Grand Library that she thought children would enjoy.

Bel shook her head. "We wanted to hear *your* stories, or maybe stories of Miss Mia's accomplishments!"

A glimmer passed through her glasses. "I see. So, you want to hear about Her Highness... You all have good taste. In that case, why don't I tell you about her first dance?" She adjusted her glasses. "Well then, everyone, did you know that Her Highness is an excellent dancer?"

"Of course I did! The name Miss Mia practically means dancing! Did you know that when she's *really* serious about her dancing, she can even fly?" Bel haughtily began to speak of her grandmother, and all the while, the kids were enraptured. Yanna and Kiryl's eyes sparkled as they listened, and even Patty was nodding along in deep interest.

"Tee hee! You know a lot, Miss Bel. Then do you know this story? I heard this from my sister, Anne..."

Thus, Elise began to speak of the Great Sage of the Empire, showering the kids with tall tales of epic proportions.

Incidentally, Mia had not always had a talent for dancing. Of course, she had been born with some aptitude for the task, but more than anything, it was plain practice that brought her to where she was today. Her lessons had been a tad harsher than the ones usually received by noble ladies, but hearing that dance lessons were a vital skill for her to learn, Mia had never questioned them. While strict and unyielding, she felt no dissatisfaction, though she would never learn just who had ordered them.

Chapter 31: The Stableman Is Certain!

"I wasn't expecting you to be watching over the children, Bel." Mia once again turned to her granddaughter. She seemed to have grown up a bit, and Mia found it reassuring. "And you were smart to come to Elise for stories. I would have thought you'd take the children on an adventure around the castle, but, oho! You've grown."

Bel flashed a grown-up grin. "Tee hee! Of course I wouldn't do that. I've been adventuring around the castle since I was small. I know every corner! Doing it now would be silly..." She looked incredibly proud of herself as she spoke these words.

Mia shrugged with a sigh. "You really do need some stricter lessons... In any case, I was thinking I would go to the Cotillards' manor to practice my riding skills. What would you five like to do?"

"I will be sure to study you carefully!" exclaimed Bel as she stood up tall. For a moment, Mia couldn't help but wonder what she could possibly study, but...it felt good, so Mia decided to drop it.

Thus, the whole group made its way to the home of Marquess Cotillard along with Dion and a few members of the Princess Guard. Gorka was in tow too given that Dongfeng would be needed. Abel, meanwhile, was absent that day, instead attending a party with Sapphias and some other young men of Tearmoon.

Abel will be living in the Empire one day, after all. It's best that he befriends Sapphias now. Mia was a tactician with the management of the country in her consideration, and she pondered this issue with crossed arms. *Plus, dates are fun exactly because they don't happen all the time! It's a truth of the world that doing something fun too often will take the magic away.* Mia was a hedonist who wanted to suck all the fun that was to be had out of every date. She gave a stern nod.

"By the way, Miss Mia, are those shoes...?" Suddenly, Bel had astutely turned her eyes to the boots Mia had been given by Abel.

"My, so you noticed! Oho! They're actually a present from Abel. Aren't they wonderful?"

"From Gr—Prince Abel? Yes, they are!" Seeing her

grandparents getting along so well, Bel couldn't help but grin.

Having arrived at the Cotillards' manor, Mia quickly made the proper greetings before changing into her riding gear. When she had stepped out into the yard, her second-favorite steed Dongfeng was waiting for her.

"Oho! You never change, Dongfeng." Dongfeng had brought his nose close to Mia, and she affectionately gave it a pet. He let out a loud whinny in response.

"Ho! So that is Her Highness's steed." Mia turned toward the voice to find Hildebrandt. "Hmph. He appears to be an average terretortue... You do not ride a moonhare?"

"There is a moonhare I ride at Saint-Noel Academy. My, how interesting. Your horse doesn't appear to be a moonhare either."

"Ha! My beloved Silver Arrow has the blood of both terretortues and a variety of swifter breeds. She is a fine horse, though she does admittedly pale in comparison to a moonhare. They are an excellent breed, don't you agree?"

Mia shook her head. "No. To me, all horses are valuable in their own right."

Mia had all the respect in the world for the animal that could take her on its back and run like the wind; whether a carriage or a ship, she ranked nothing that could save her from danger above another. Among them, horses were the final lifeline she could rely on. There were no complaints that could be raised against any one of them.

"I see. So that is your philosophy. By the way, do you wish to simply ride today?"

"What do you mean?"

With a straight face, Hildebrandt suddenly put his horse into a gallop and headed straight for one of the obstacles. He and his horse jumped over it as if defying gravity, and when they had landed on the other side, he grinned. "I thought you would have interest in these obstacles. If you are a horse lover, that is."

"My, Hildebrandt. Are you challenging me?"

"Nothing of the sort! I simply thought that if you had bested an Equestri, so much would be easy for you." Hildebrandt laughed once again, and Mia flashed him a competitive grin.

"Sure. Backing down would sully my name. Giddyap, Dongfeng!"

With a whinny, Dongfeng quietly began to gallop away. Mia watched as the obstacle grew closer and closer. Up close, it was an awful lot...taller...than she thought it would be. *Huh? Wouldn't it be super hard to—?* Just as that thought flashed through her mind, Dongfeng accelerated toward the obstacle, kicking his hind legs into the earth and launching them into the air.

"Huh?!"

For a moment, Mia was flying. In a panic, she flexed her legs and gripped the reins to prevent her from getting launched right off her horse. But in the next moment, Dongfeng landed, and the shock wave was more than she could have imagined. Her body shook back and forth, and it took everything in her power to maintain her stance. While Dongfeng ran forward to work off the aftershock, Mia could only think, *Th-That was terrifying!!!* She began to tremble. A cold sweat began to drip down her back, but then...

"Woo-hoo!"

...She caught sight of Yanna, who was clapping her hands with fervor, and Kiryl who was shouting out in joy. Even Patty was blinking her eyes in shock. It felt *good*.

"Oho! Piece of cake!" Letting herself get completely carried away, she removed a hand from the reins and waved at the children. "Oho ho! That felt wonderful. Onto the next, Dongfeng!"

As Mia jumped over countless obstacles, someone silently watched. It was none other than Gorka, the Princess Guard's stableman. As he watched Mia gracefully jump over obstacles, he couldn't help but let out a shout of joy. Then, he nodded as if he had come to an understanding. What thoughts went through his head? What had this sight inspired his certainty in? Mia, for one, had no way of knowing.

Chapter 32: Those Who Mock Peace and Abel's Determination

"Good grief..." Inside an inn nestled in a corner of Lunatear, those words reverberated with a loud sigh. After collapsing into his bed, Serpent Shaman Ka Kunlou glared at the man in the bandana. "You've got to be crazy, trying to challenge Dion Alaia."

The man protested. "Is it really so surprising? Exchanging blades with the wolfmaster, our pursuer, and Dion Alaia, our enemy's strongest, is as natural as the waves stealing off with the beach's sand."

"A simple head-on attack like that is not what a Serpent should do. I see the High Priestess has got a thing or two to teach the Sea Serpents of the West," he lamented with a shake of his head. "Do you seafarers not know how to take down a castle? The first step is to consider if there's a need to in the first place."

"I've never seen such words in *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*."

"I'm talking about *common sense*." Kunlou was exasperated.

The man glared at him. "You mean we need to consider whether there is a need to kill Mia Luna Tearmoon? I believe she would be the first on the list..."

"Even if we do need to kill her, we don't have to do so when it's the hardest for us. To take down the strongest of castles, you use starvation tactics, or poison, fire...whatever else there is. Attacking head-on is not the way of us Serpents." Kunlou sighed once again, despairing at the obtuseness of his conversation partner. "In any case, let's not get ahead of ourselves. We've got to stay low for a while. We don't wanna do anything that interferes with the Olden Serpents of Tearmoon. As a pacifist, I'm no fan of fights."

"A pacifist..." The man spit out those words with a shake of his head.

"I see you're not a fan of peace, then?" Kunlou asked before muttering, "Well, I guess there aren't many Serpents who *do* like

peace," while grinning at his own hypocrisy.

"The word 'pacifist' is one I've only known as a cliché from those who want to protect the current system. I'm sure peace is what those who are living the good life want. It's only natural for them to despise those who seek to break what has worked in their favor. But *we* are the ones who have been trampled by it. It's beyond absurd for those like us who have been trampled by it to tout 'peace,' don't you agree?" With that, the man removed his bandana, revealing the symbol that had led to his alienation. His Third Eye quietly stared into empty space.

"I take it back. You *are* a Serpent, the purest kind we've got."

The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth gave the weak the fangs they needed to fight. It whispered to those who read it, demanding that the beaten down destroy the order that had left them so bloodied. Violence was both the most basic and quickest way to sow chaos. However...

"Still, I think we better stay low."

"Even though you have a sword like me by your side?"

"Ha ha! Our High Priestess had her own sword, the wolfmaster. He was strong, but...alas, he fell before the Great Sage of the Empire." He gave a few fake sobs.

The man with the bandana once again glared back. "I am, however, quite certain that I'm stronger than the wolfmaster."

"On the sea, sure. But on horseback, he's equally a menace. Dion Alaia was nothing before him. If you really do have a death wish, though, I won't stop you." He cut off his words with a friendly grin. "Unlike Maku, you've got a sense of humor. You'll make for a fine traveling companion."

"Thank you, I suppose. While I hate to put an end to this exhilarating chat, I have a question for you, shaman of the High Priestess. You say we mustn't get in the way of the Olden Serpents of Tearmoon, but just what do you think they are planning?"

Kunlou grinned. "Who knows... We've no longer got the information network created by that barbarian Jem through infiltrating Sunkland, so there's not too much we can do, but I guess that doesn't have much to do with the Olden Serpents. They've been in Tearmoon much longer than my group's been kicking around," he muttered, stroking his chin. He was largely ignorant of the affairs in Tearmoon, and he prefaced his words with that information.

“Well,” he continued, “their targets must be those around the princess... The Yellowmoons are familiar with the Serpents, and since they may know something about the Olden Serpents, I doubt it’s them. There was room to slip into the Redmoons, but Princess Mia’s currently interfering with their affairs. I guess that leaves...the Greenmoons, who are caring for my dear friend Prince Echard, or the Bluemoons. They’ve got a few good targets, and if they’re going to make their move soon, don’t you think we’d better watch over them?”

“You want us to be simple observers?”

“Under normal circumstances, our move would be to spread chaos, but one mistake by *us* could bring *them* down, or vice versa. We could be barking up the wrong tree if we do anything now. Let’s just do what Serpents do and not do anything unnecessary.”

“A snake that barks does sound like a being born from chaos, doesn’t it?”

Kunlou grinned. “Ha ha! You make for better company than Maku. I hope I get to spend some more time with you.”

On the day that followed that conversation, just when Mia was leaping over obstacles at the Cotillard residence, Abel Remno was visiting a villa that belonged to the Bluemoons in Lunatear. Sapphias had invited him to a gathering, and while they had worked on the Student Council together during their time at Saint-Noel Academy, there was little personal connection between them.

Using this opportunity to further our friendship should benefit Mia too.

Having entered the room, Abel bowed at his host. “Thank you for inviting me here today, Lord Sapphias.”

“No, it is I who should be thankful for the acceptance of my invitation, Prince Abel. I believe this is our first time meeting outside the academy.”

Besides Sapphias, the room was filled with other young men, most likely sons of nobles in the Bluemoon Faction. Including Abel and Sapphias, there were five in total.

Should I be focused on simply making connections, or does Lord Sapphias have another aim? Abel was calm against their judging stares. He shook each of their hands, making his own observations as he did so. Their manners were impeccable, but Abel also caught sight of their weaknesses. Their hands were soft, and most likely,

none had ever held a sword before. *No, it would be dangerous to underestimate them.* Abel sobered himself into focus and sat in the seat he had been led to.

"Well, then. Let's begin this welcome party." At Sapphias's call, the others took their seats as well.

Incidentally, this was a daytime party, and thus the refreshments were tea and tea cakes. Seeing such scrumptious snacks, Abel couldn't help but wish he could bring some to share with Mia.

"It has been quite a while. How are things at Saint-Noel's?"

"Nothing much has changed. Everyone is still giving their all to support Mia."

Sapphias squinted his eyes as he thought back to earlier times. "I see... Ha ha. Thinking that I'll never get to return to such days myself has left me a tad jealous..."

As Abel made efforts to rekindle his old friendship with Sapphias, he kept one eye on the others in the room. *They don't seem as welcoming to me as Sapphias. Well, considering that the Bluemoon Faction supports Lord Sapphias as heir to the throne, it's only natural they would show some hostility toward me, given how close I am to Mia... Still, I don't sense anything as strong as what I felt in town yesterday. If anything...*

"May I speak, Prince Abel?" a voice suddenly called out. Abel looked up to find a plump young man looking in his direction.

Oh, he's... Abel recognized the boy. *He supported Mia during the election.*

"This is the first time I've been able to speak to you directly. My name is Uros, and I am the son of Baron Langess. I am glad to make your acquaintance."

"I as well," he replied with a dashing grin.

However, Uros responded with a glare. "I hear that you and Her Highness are lovers..." The room suddenly felt colder. His approach was sudden, but Abel took it merrily.

"I do not know if we are so much as lovers, but...we are quite good friends."

"My apologies, but the Kingdom of Remno lacks power compared to Tearmoon. Do you believe you could suit Her Highness Mia Luna Tearmoon despite that fact?"

It was an incredibly rude question, but it did not anger Abel. Should the question have just been meant to ridicule him, it might

have, and he would not have any qualms in responding to such discourtesy with whatever it deserved. However, Uros's question had no such intentions.

Abel took a moment to consider them. *Ah, he's worried for Mia.* Abel turned to the faces of the others in the room and realized this was the reason they were so weary of him. It was true that there were nobles in the Bluemoon Faction who worked against Mia, but others loved her and regarded her in good favor. Those who were gathered today were most likely the latter and sought to support Mia in the same way as Sapphias.

Lord Sapphias really knows his people... Impressed by his efforts, Abel once again brought himself into focus. Those before him were no simple foes; they were metaphorical knights devoted to Mia, their princess of undoubtable shining glory and unwavering pride. Before them now was not only a man who wished to become that princess's lover, but a prince hailing from a country far-off from Tearmoon that could not match it in power, *and* he was their second prince to boot. It was only natural they would be so weary of him, and allaying their fears was the responsibility of none other than Abel.

I need to become someone who's worthy of her—someone who the people here now could accept.

This fighting spirit hidden in his chest, Abel showed Uros a smile. "Before a mountain, anyone would wish to climb to its top, and before a sea of stars, anyone would wish to reach their arm out to the moon above. Don't you agree, Lord Uros?" Abel looked at his own hand. "As I am now, I am no match for Mia. I am well aware of that fact, but I also have no intentions of resigning myself to be as I am now forever." He clenched his fist. "I promise you this, Uros Langess: one day, I will be a man worthy of the Great Sage of the Empire Mia Luna Tearmoon."

Hearing his answer, Uros gave a satisfied nod. "I see you are determined, Prince Abel. That is what has put you in Princess Mia's heart. I shall support you in whatever meager way I can, Your Highness."

Thus, the atmosphere at Sapphias's gathering had softened.

Chapter 33: Princess Mia Rides the Wave with All She Has

Mia Luna Tearmoon, the Great Sage of the Empire, had many responsibilities. She currently was in the middle of some very important work in her second office...in other words, the White Night Dining Hall in the Whitemoon Palace.

Working here means I don't have to wait for my cups of tea, and sometimes a kind soul will bring me snacks. It's the perfect workplace!

With this useless thought in mind, Mia would make frequent appearances in the dining hall to slog through her work. So, what was she currently working on? That was...

"Here is the menu for tonight's supper, Your Highness."

"Thank you."

Yes, she was checking the dinner menu! To Mia, this was one of the most important tasks to be had.

"Oho! Ambermoon tomato stew and a platter of three types of mushrooms! The chef really knows his stuff." After looking over the parchment presented to her by the kitchen staff, she gave a pompous nod and said, "I do want the children to eat healthy without being picky... This is the perfect lineup."

Patty was Mia's grandmother, after all. If she didn't grow up strong and healthy, that might affect Mia.

"Oh, but this might not be enough for Kiryl. Young boys eat quite a lot, and I think Abel would want some meat on the menu as well."

"I see. In that case, we will add a meat dish."

"Also, if you could double the desserts..."

"The chef has instructed us to keep the sweets to a reasonable level, Your Highness..." said the kitchen staff with a scowl.

Mia tried to laugh it off. "Oho ho! Don't take me too seriously. It was only a joke! A simple *jest.* Do you really think I would earnestly ask for you to increase the amount of dessert? Oho!"

With that conversation over, Mia felt some eyes on her coming

from the dining hall's entrance.

"...Hm?" Mia turned to find Patty, who had turned up at some point or another, staring at her. "O-Oh, Patty. What is it?"

"Um, Kiryl is hungry. I wanted to get him something to eat."

"I-I see. In that case..." Mia made eye contact with the kitchen staff. "Please bring the same tea cakes I'm having to the children. Oh, and please bring me some seconds as well."

"Certainly. I shall bring you seconds on your *tea*, and the children some tea cakes."

"Huh? But what about my snacks?"

The staff of the White Night Dining Hall were skilled, for this member had slipped away too fast for Mia's words to reach their ears.

Not quite pleased with these events, Mia set her eyes on Patty. *It seems like she's begun to adjust to the castle. I'm glad she seems to be enjoying herself. In order to protect the "now," I need to make Patty fond of this world. And while she's away from the Serpents, I want her to rest her soul.*

With the tea cakes finally out, Patty gave the slightest of grins, leaving Mia satisfied with her development. But before she could even let out a sigh, more work had come her way in the form of a bespectacled civil official.

"My apologies, Your Highness. I have brought the plans for the Horsemanship Tournament."

"So, you're already done! Let me see..."

Ludwig handed her a thick stack of parchment. "I created it with the opinions of Miss Ruby, Captain Vanos, and Gorka the stableman in mind."

"I see... Ah, so the program won't just consist of races." Mia scanned the documents to find many additions by Ludwig.

"The first three events, along with the main showdown between Miss Aima and Lord Hildebrandt are simple tests of speed. As I thought it would be boring should they all be the same, the lengths all differ. Events four and five are races that involve clearing obstacles."

"Ooh! This pentathlon seems interesting!"

"Yes. Event seven is horseback archery, and event eight horseback swordsmanship. The ninth event is a pentathlon built around our military training regimen and combining various skills.

Even I have never heard of another competition combining swordsmanship and archery both on and off a horse."

"I'm assuming this was Ruby's idea? Oho! I would expect nothing less from a Redmoon. It's an excellent idea... Hm?" The last item on the list demanded all of Mia's attention. "Huh? What is this? 'Horse Dance (tentative)'?"

"There was no name for such an event, so I created one for convenience." Ludwig adjusted his glasses with a matter-of-fact look. "Gorka informed me that yesterday, you indulged in some diligent practice of jumps at the residence of Marquess Cotillard."

"Yes... I suppose I did." Mia thought back on yesterday. Now that he mentioned it, she did get caught up in the glee of it all and waved at all the children as she jumped over obstacles again and again.

"This Horse Dance is a display of beautiful jumps, a waltz where the body of man and horse become one. Rather than compete against another, I thought it best this event be used to instead show your appreciation to all the participants."

I...see... I guess that would be fitting for the end of a Horsemanship Tournament, thought Mia as if it were someone else who would be doing this "Horse Dance" and not herself. But unfortunately, it was *herself* and this was *her* problem. Having tried jumping for herself, she had realized just how much of an ask this event was. It would take practice for her to jump over so many obstacles in such quick processions, and yesterday, even Dongfeng had been starting to get fed up with all the hops halfway through.

Mia frantically flipped through the documents, quickly finding a page labeled "Horse Dance (tentative)." There, she found a sketch that made use of the entire riding grounds, littering it with obstacles.

"O-Oh, th-this would be..."

"This is simply an idea drawn up by Gorka. I had him place the obstacles so that all could see your excellent riding skills from anywhere in the audience."

"I-I see..." Mia tried to rein in her scowl. *Th-This would be the worst... Is there maybe some way I can turn this down?* Mia immediately started to think it through. She imagined what it would be like should she *not* do this, once again staring at the parchment, and... *Agh! I-It's too much!* She was nothing before the love for horses that overflowed from the document. The hopes,

passions, and dreams of someone thinking Mia doing this “Horse Dance (tentative)” would be the best thing in the world dripped from the paper, and it left Mia feeling dizzy.

But what really made this difficult was how well-thought-out the event was—it wasn’t completely impossible for her, but instead toed the line of just what would be possible if she gave the event everything she had. If, for example, the plans demanded that she jump over a castle wall or fly in the air, she’d be able to ridicule it as absurd and turn it down. However, this Horse Dance could be hers if she worked hard enough. In other words, something within her reach had been proposed, and it now all rested on whether Mia would reach out for it or not...which also meant that turning it down would be a declaration that she would be unwilling to do so.

E-Even if I did *turn this down, it would certainly have a negative effect on Gorka’s morale and his loyalty to me. Though me making a fool of myself while trying to do this would also have the same effect...*

A tsunami was approaching. If she decided to ride this wave and give this event her all, her retainers would show her loyalty the likes of which had never been seen before. But if she decided to take the easy route and drown, the damage would be immeasurable.

I-It makes no sense. I was supposed to just make a quick appearance at the end and sit back and relax this time! So why do I now have to...?!

Mia had been ready to enjoy this summer, and now, the same words she had told Bel had come back to bite her. Yes...Mia’s respite—right here and right now—had ended!

She groaned. “This is a wonderful plan. I’ll need to give this my all!”

There was no helping it. Mia was an aurelia. There was no need for her to defy waves. Mia knew that before one, the easiest thing to do was dive in headfirst and take the easy route. Thus, Mia began her training arc.

Chapter 34: Princess Mia Speaks of Friends

The Horsemanship Tournament would be held in seven days' time. Until then, Mia spent her days practicing as much as was possible—she was *serious*. When a guillotine was chasing her, there was none who could match Mia's focus.

If I ever do need to make a dash for it, I can't let a stupid fence stop me! When considering this a run-through of a possible escape, this grueling training didn't seem so bad. Mia worked ever closer to perfecting her riding style of, "just don't get in the horse's way," and now, she was even able to remove a hand from the reins and wave. She now seemed confident... Well, perhaps *over*confident was the right term.

"Oho! Riding is so fun!"

After thoroughly moving her body, she had a thorough meal to nourish her empty stomach, took a bath to thoroughly wash away her sweat, and had a thorough sleep. This was the healthiest Mia had ever lived, and these healthy habits had left her skin glowing.

Usually, Mia had company in her training. If it wasn't Bel or Citrina, it was Aima, and today, Mia was accompanied by Yanna, Kiryl, and Patty. The three entertained themselves through riding a small pony, which seemed to delight them to no end. Even Patty seemed to be having fun, which had caught Mia by surprise. *I never heard anything about Grandmother Patricia being able to ride horses, so I was a bit worried, but I'm glad she's enjoying herself.*

While Mia was busy practicing, it was Abel who watched over the three. He gently led their pony by the reins, and Mia couldn't help but feel like she was getting a glimpse into the future where it was their *own* kids he was entertaining...

Sweet moons! It's so dreamy watching him care for children! The sight had struck a certain chord in Mia, but anyway...

When Mia's practice was over and they returned to the palace, Mia made a beeline for the baths. Her body warmed, she decided to

afterward cool off in the dining hall.

"Cold juice after a bath is just the best..." she sighed. But as she was lazing around, she suddenly caught sight of Yanna. Her hair was dripping wet, and Mia couldn't help but grin. It was common knowledge in the palace that one of Princess Mia's few indulgences were her baths. Unlike Saint-Noel, Tearmoon didn't have the proper facilities, making heating all the bath water a laborious process. Mia's insistence on a daily bath despite this fact made this an undeniable indulgence.

Still (as presumptuous as it might have been), Mia always lamented how wasteful it was to simply throw away the water, especially since Anne always went through the trouble of preparing herbs to add to the tub. While it *was* a waste, she couldn't have Anne just use the water either. She might have been Mia's personal maid, but giving her such special treatment could turn the others against her. At the same time, another noble lady—like Citrina, for example—obviously couldn't just use Mia's water secondhand. It was only proper that she had her own prepared. Thus, the issue of what to do with Mia's bathwater was one that had long gone unsolved...but the three visiting kids had solved the issue for her, and today, too, they enjoyed their baths in the water Mia had left behind.

Having caught sight of Yanna drying her hair as she walked, Mia decided to call out. "I take it you're fresh out of the bath?"

"Ah! Princess Mia!" She jumped into the air and straightened her posture. Then, she came up to Mia as fast as she could.

As soon as she was in reach, Mia touched her hair. "I see you've used not only shampoo, but oils." She laughed. "Your hair really is beautiful." She messed with the ends of Yanna's hair as if confirming that fact before grinning once again. She had already instructed Anne to use the bathtime goods she had prepared for Mia on the younger ones as well. Mia wasn't stingy. In fact, she *needed* her grandmother and her friends to be able to live as cleanly and healthily as they could.

I know for sure that Miss Rafina would get mad at me if they returned to Saint-Noel emaciated!

From that perspective, it was the kids who decided whether Rafina would be an angry lion or friendly house cat. She was ready to treat them with all the hospitality she had!

Yanna giggled awkwardly as Mia played with her locks.

“Hm? What is it?”

“It’s just…nobody ever told me that before,” she said, her cheeks slightly red.

“They haven’t? You better prepare yourself, then.” She put on a teasing grin. “I’m certain you’ll grow up to be a beauty! Oho, you’ll have men telling you that from left and right.”

Yanna gave her a troubled look.

“Well anyways, how do you like Lunatear?” Mia continued. “Have you and Kiryl grown bored?”

“Oh, no, Your Highness. You have treated us so very kindly…”

Mia laughed. “No need to be so stiff. I’m just glad you’re still enjoying yourselves. Ah! That’s right.” Mia clapped her hands. “I’ve been meaning to ask you. How do you think Patty has been lately? For example, when you three were riding earlier…”

“Um…” Yanna took a moment to think. “I think she was enjoying herself, but…”

“But?”

“I think she’s sad she can’t see her younger brother. She said he was her only family…”

“I see…” Mia crossed her arms and began to ponder. *So she has a younger brother… I did hear her calling out in her sleep once. “Hannes,” was it? I thought that might be the case given how she treats Kiryl, but she really does have a younger sibling.* Mia nodded as it all began to fall into place. *But if he’s her only family, does that mean her parents weren’t with House Clausius? Marquess Clausius in Patty’s time would’ve been… Hm…*

“Um, I’ll keep a close eye on her and report to you,” said Yanna, her back as straight as a pin.

Mia smiled. “Yes, please…do…” A shiver suddenly made its way down Mia’s back along with a vision—the sight of a grinning Rafina.

What in the moons was that…? Why did I feel like I was in danger? She took a moment to think; the answer was obvious. The keyword here was “friends.” Led by this sense of danger, Mia carefully crafted her words. “Yanna, I’m glad you are willing to do this for me. However, I don’t want you to be by Patty’s side out of your own self-interest.”

“Huh…?”

“I’m happy to hear that you are willing to pay special attention to Patty for me, but I don’t want that to come before your

friendship. I don't want you to be her friend just so you can see what lies inside her heart. I want you to be a true friend to her."

To the Holy Lady of Belluga, friends were incredibly important. If—just if—Rafina found out Mia was using the label of "friends" in order to collect information, just what would happen?

Nothing good, that's for sure! She would probably think my values had been compromised. That would be *bad*. One wrong move and Rafina would once again be asking her, "Who are you again?" No, now that Mia had made the mistake of becoming her friend, Rafina would be even *more* hurt. *The danger of harming that terrifying lion is unknowable!*

That would be petrifying, and seeing that grin once again was sure to leave a scar on her soul. Now that they had become friends, Mia wanted it to stay that way. She prayed and prayed that Rafina would forever be as kind as she was now.

"Of course, you are free to pay her special mind, but that has to come from a place of friendship. And if there's anything you're worried about, you are free to bring it to me. However, if it's your wish to help me that's strongest in your mind, you'll start to question if you two are really friends, won't you?" Mia placed a hand on her head. "Yanna, I'm happy you would do so much for me, but there's no need to think about what you can do to make yourself useful for my sake. Even should it have no benefit for me, I would never abandon you and Kiryl. So don't worry. I just want you and Patty to treat each other as any other pair of friends."

Suddenly, Yanna looked as if she was about to cry. She choked out a question. "Princess Mia... Just what...are friends?"

"Huh...?"

"I... I've never had a friend, so I don't know."

Mia realized something: as a Visalian—as someone mocked as the descendant of pirates—it wouldn't be strange if this girl had never made a friend.

"That's...right..."

Mia cursed her lack of foresight under her breath and began to think. *What are friends? That's quite the question...* Still, Mia couldn't just give a half-baked answer. The question had been asked in earnest, and not treating it with equal thought and honesty could affect Yanna negatively.

Mia fell into silence as she racked her brains. She envisioned her dear friend Chloe...

“Hm... At least for me, I think friends are people who you properly treasure without denying or ridiculing the things *they* cherish.”

Mia had befriended Chloe through books. Still, their tastes in literature didn’t exactly align, and there were times Mia couldn’t help but question just what could possibly be interesting about a book Chloe was currently reading.

However, Mia had never denied her tastes, just as Chloe had never denied hers. Rather, she had instead made the effort to read the books she thought she would have never chosen on her own, and as a result, the two had grown both their horizons.

“You talk together and learn what each other cherishes...and through that, you affect each other positively. Both your worlds grow bigger, and I think that’s what defines a good friendship... I suppose that was maybe a bit hard to understand.” Mia gave an embarrassed smile, but Yanna had paid attention to every single one of her words. In fact, she had listened so intently Mia was half expecting her to whip out a notebook and start writing things down. “There’s no need to be so afraid. If you’ve never had a friend, all you have to do is make a bunch of them starting now. You can relax and take things easier.”

With that, Mia brought her hand to Yanna’s head, encouraging her with all she had in hopes it would inspire her to be a good friend to Patty.

Incidentally, there was something Mia had failed to notice. It was none other than the fact that seeing the value in friendship and considering the subject so intensely meant that Mia was treasuring the things Rafina found so important *herself*. Completely unbeknownst to her, Mia was fostering the friendship she shared with Rafina.

Side Story: The Foodstuffs Assistance Team —The Girl Who Sang the Praises of the Serpents—

From the flames of revolution that turned the imperial family and eminent nobles of Tearmoon to ash, there was a family who had not only escaped but gained great prosperity. This was the Lagerfelds, a viscount family who stood alongside the only survivors of the Etoilers, the Yellowmoons, as the last survivors of the central nobility.

This is the story of the accomplishments and prosperity of Henrika Lagerfeld, the viscount's daughter who was blessed by the Serpents.

The first time the Serpents appeared to her was before her time in Saint-Noel Academy. Despite being central nobles, the Lagerfelds held importance in name only; they suffered from poverty. Right before the collapse of the family's finances, the prodigal viscount razed the fields as his solution, hoping to find his means of survival through "cutting-edge, revolutionary, and yet-unknown industries." He was the perfect embodiment of Tearmoon central nobility.

Despite these circumstances, Henrika was proud of her family's long history, and thus, could not accept the fact it was unlikely she would ever be able to attend Saint-Noel Academy for herself.

"Of course the daughter of the illustrious, high-class Lagerfelds should be able to attend Saint-Noel!" she lamented, yet her cries could not change fate. Thus, she spent her days in a melancholic haze.

Until the day came when that suddenly changed, and a snake appeared before her. "How lamentable! To think that the young lady of an illustrious family like the Lagerfelds cannot attend Saint-Noel! 'Tis unthinkable," said a man with a smile. His name was Jem, visiting as a guest of her father's, and he spoke sweet, alluring words that tickled the sense of pride in every Lagerfeld. "Would I be

allowed to help your family?"

"Even without your help, our family can—"

"Of course they can! However, I would like your permission to offer my aid. It is a mistake that a family such as yours has fallen into such hard times. It is hard for me to turn a blind eye to the struggles of such an upright family."

It felt good to hear those words. They sank straight into Henrika's heart...as well as her father's. He accepted Jem's aid, and through this, regained the finances the house had lost. Yet, there was none who realized this was nothing but the poison of a sycophantic Serpent.

Thus, Henrika was able to attend Saint-Noel, but she was entrusted with an odd request: to join the posse of Princess Mia and report her actions to Holy Lady Rafina and Prince Sion of Sunkland. Jem had asked her to take careful notice of Mia's proper favoritism of the central nobility and her ability to scold the lower nobility with dignity, and then spread that to the rest of the school through rumors.

"My! Is that really all I must do?" she asked in surprise.

Jem gave a friendly laugh. "It's quite the important task. We need to show just how proud and wonderful Her Highness is to the Holy Lady. Through that, the light of Tearmoon will shine ever more brilliantly, and you're the only one who can make that happen, Miss Henrika."

"But I hear Her Highness is quite selfish. Would it not reflect badly on her to speak of these traits?" she asked, a twinge of doubt in her chest.

"If she truly does something worthy of the Holy Lady's reproach, we must have those actions corrected. The criticism of Miss Rafina and Prince Sion will only grow her character."

Those words once again sank easily into her heart. "Yes, you're exactly correct, such as anything coming from a man who has done so much to help us Lagerfelds would be."

Thus, Henrika followed Jem's orders, easily leaking all of Mia's actions to Rafina and Sion. And each time she did, Jem's "magnanimous support" grew her family's riches. Through doing the right thing, she not only saved her family, but garnered praise from her parents. Henrika exalted Princess Mia's dignity, spreading the word of how strictly Mia criticized the lesser nobles with the traditions of Tearmoon's nobles at heart. Just like Jem had

instructed her, this was all done through rumors.

Just like that, one year passed, then another, and then another, and eventually, Henrika learned the meaning of what she had done. The rocky relationship between Mia, Sion, and Rafina had at some point grown beyond repair.

Then came the famine, and then the revolution that had started in Rudolvon Outland County. The Lagerfelds admirably made it through these tumultuous times, and it wasn't just that. With their family blessed by the Serpents—and Henrika playing a role in dividing Tearmoon, Sunkland, and Belluga—the influence of the Lagerfelds only grew. While the other families of the central nobility had been reduced to ash by the revolution's flames, they not so much as singed the Lagerfelds.

And behind all this, Henrika simply spread baseless rumors over and over, whispering words Jem had taught her to the people Jem had directed her to. Those words were like a strong liquor, sweet and cool in the mouth and able to lure her listeners into a drunken stupor, only able to sober up when destruction befell them and it was already too late.

The whole time, House Lagerfeld only grew more rich and more powerful.

Henrika's life was a cycle of glory weaved through countless successes. And once it had begun to near its end...she looked out the window to the garden below. She watched as preparations were made for a feast to celebrate her birthday. In one corner, her grandchildren were practicing a performance to honor their beloved grandmother. Her three children would later gather here to celebrate her too.

But while she watched, a thought suddenly occurred to her. *Is this really what will make me happy?*

The scene unfolding below was that of prosperity—a vignette of a life well lived. She watched it once again, testing the words "Ah, my life was truly wonderful. I have so much pride in us glorious Lagerfelds" with a whisper. They had exploited their citizens, deceived the revolutionary government, and ruined their fellow nobles. Thus, they gained glory and unwavering influence. That was certainly something to take pride in, but...in her chest had blossomed an inexplicable unease.

Compelled by this feeling, she took out her box of treasures.

Inside were one, two, three...*four* large gems so rare and pricey that few kings could even dream of owning one of them, much less a commoner. There were intricately designed rings, necklaces, and earrings, and she owned beautiful dresses and shoes both luxurious and comfortable—she had everything.

Adorning her estate were gorgeous paintings, rugs crafted from countries afar, and furniture made of the most splendid of woods. The dazzling light of her brilliant chandelier shined even brighter than her family's legacy. Henrika walked through her mansion, counting each and every one as if they were spoils of war.

"Ah, I'm so happy. My life was wonderful. I was not mistaken—I never made a single mistake." Now in her old age, she wore a victorious grin. "I have this large house, these beautiful artworks that sing our family's praises, and a husband with great wisdom. My children and grandchildren are healthy. Nothing could shake us Lagerfelds," she sang, or perhaps simply declared to the heavens. "I am so happy it is almost frightening. Ah, how happy I am! How truly happy I am!"

...It was a prayer, the tragic supplication that she would be as fulfilled as she claimed.

"What brought me this happiness was the fact I made no mistakes. Indeed. Indeed! I truly never erred."

She wanted someone to guarantee to her that her path had not been mistaken. No matter how many times she counted her expensive jewels—nor how many times she gazed upon the children and grandchildren that would uphold the glorious House Lagerfeld—it never made her certain.

...No. Whenever she gazed upon her adorable grandchildren, all it reminded her was what she had done: deceiving and ruining just as the Serpents willed her. But there was no other path. Had she gone against this will, it was *her* family which would have been ruined, and had she followed, she would be promised prosperity. There was no choice to be made.

She made no mistake. She *couldn't* have been mistaken. And yet...

"Oh, how happy I am! How glorious it is to live a life of no mistakes." She said it over and over again, as if humming those words would make them true—as if it would make her *believe* they were true. She said it again and again, and then again...and then again, and again, and again...

“What a wonderful life I lived. I have no regrets! I lived a life I can truly be proud of.”

And when her time finally came to an end, those were the final words she breathed before she could do so no longer.

Thus, the curtain closed on the brilliant, magnificent life of Henrika Lagerfeld, head of the glorious Lagerfelds, the final viscount family of the Tearmoon Empire. She lived a life boasting of prosperity and riches said to outnumber even those of the Merchant King Shalloak Cornrogue, but whether she lived a life as fulfilling and happy as she claimed was something unknown to none other than herself...nay, even her.

Then changed the flow of time...

That year, Mia had started her third serving as student council president, a reign quite long among the position’s history. Considering that the Holy Lady of Belluga attended the academy alongside her made that only more of a miracle.

Now in her third year, Mia sought to restructure the student council’s personnel. In other words...

“I absolutely need to get Rania involved!”

According to the calendar in Mia’s head, the Great Famine would soon be upon them. Starting this summer, the harvest would decline for the two following years, and in order to prepare, Mia wanted the most detailed counterplan possible.

“As a princess of Perujin, I absolutely want to work in close cooperation with her.”

Thus, Mia had welcomed Rania to the fold, creating the best student council lineup possible. Among its members, three were especially knowledgeable in matters of the food supply: Rania and Tiona, who were quite familiar with farmlands, and Chloe, who, as daughter of a merchant, was familiar with the supply chain. These three were essential to the Mianet, and they knew exactly the hopes Mia had placed in them. In response, they were proactive in sharing their knowledge and creating opportunities for discussions between them.

Eventually, these three women came to be known as the Foodstuffs Assistance Team, with all matters of provisions being carried out in accordance with their guidance.

That day, the Foodstuffs Assistance Team (more commonly known as F.A.T.) were sharing their opinions on the approaching danger.

"Princess Mia's Bread-Cake Declaration was truly wonderful. I believe the ideology it espouses is essential to continuing to provide provisions to the people." Tiona put a hand to her chest and continued. "We must do our absolute best to make her vision come true."

In the timeline Mia had kicked aside, Outcount Rudolvon was a man of virtue who provided foodstuffs to his people for no cost. As his daughter, Tiona's thinking tended to lean toward pure magnanimity.

On the other hand, Chloe pushed up her glasses as she spoke. "I agree that it is a wonderful ideal. However, I believe it is difficult to act on charity alone." As daughter of a merchant, Chloe didn't find promises based in pure benevolence trustworthy. People's hearts easily changed, and promises were just as easily broken. "Of course we must provide support, and I don't think we should institute conditions for doing so. But I do think there's a need to record the promise that 'should another country fall on tough times, they shall be supported' in writing." That which was important must be recorded so that it could be read over once again. She saw from the eyes of a merchant where contracts meant everything.

As Tiona and Rania had both been the receiving ends of broken promises before, they agreed with her words.

"In that case, why don't we include contracts for borrowing farmlands as well?" suggested the eldest of the bunch, Rania Tafrif Perujin, in a cheery voice.

"Do you mean we should take their rights to the farmland away?"

"No, I simply mean that we should ask for the farmers' cooperation. I'm sure you are aware that a new strain of wheat is being developed at Saint Mia Academy, no? I was thinking it would be best to ensure there were lands cultivating that strain."

This proposal put a fire in Chloe's eyes. "I see... If we could send people into the borrowed fields under the pretext of observation, we would be able to get a general idea of that land's production capacity. That may be a good idea."

"I agree that it's a wonderful proposal," added Tiona.

“Huh? Y-You think...?” All their praise had Rania feeling a bit bashful, but Tiona responded with seriousness.

“I believe Miss Mia’s Bread-Cake Declaration lays out a path where we can take pride in the lives we live.” The intensity of her words had Rania and Chloe listening with bated breaths. “And, I think the contracts you two have created are an effective way to lure people to walk down that path. It asks that people promise to help those in need, putting it into law.”

“I’m relieved to hear you say that. I thought you might be against it since it means taking advantage of people’s weaknesses...” said Chloe with a forced grin.

Tiona shook her head. “Not at all. We are among the weak. While we can feel the debt of gratitude for a moment and wish to one day repay that debt, it’s quite hard to keep that feeling forever. And so, we easily take the easiest path. It’s not easy to do good things even when you want to. Often, those thoughts get swept away into the ideas that as long as your domain or the nobles are affluent, then all is well. That’s why we need a system that will increase the number of people who choose to walk down the path Miss Mia has created for us.” With that, she gave a shy smile. “I’m sorry, I sounded a bit too full of myself there, didn’t I?”

Seeing this side of Tiona, Rania and Chloe couldn’t help but giggle.

Just as F.A.T. were getting deep into this conversation, Mia walked down the halls. She had not only prepared measures to counter the oncoming famine in Tearmoon, but prepared the perfect lineup of student council members for that task. However, there was one thing that still weighed on her mind.

“The real issue is the vanity of our nobles. I can easily imagine them being silent about the situation in their domains until it becomes too late to fix it. I would like to ask the Four Dukes to gather this type of information, but...”

Mia had high hopes for the three graduated Etoilers, but at the same time, she couldn’t just leave everything in the hands of others; the famine was a momentous event that could directly lead to ruin.

“It may actually be easier to find someone for the task here in Saint-Noel. The central nobility are prideful, but that just means they blabber away as soon as you start to flatter them! I think I have a plan of action here.”

Thus, the princess of high-powered gazes spent day and night on the lookout for any students who seemed off. Her sights landed her on a single young woman rushing down the hall with a letter in hand. She looked pale.

"My, isn't that Henrika?" Mia tilted her head and began to think. The daughter of Viscount Lagerfeld had been a member of Mia's posse when she had started her time at Saint-Noel Academy. Mia realized she hadn't seen her lately, and she couldn't even remember if she had been a member of the Mia faction during the student council election when she was in her second year.

"She might have not liked the special importance I place on Anne and decided to distance herself. It's not an issue that she left my clique, but...something is off about her."

With a vigorous nod, Mia rushed into action.

After reading through the letter she had received from her parents, Henrika let out a large sigh. Inside, her parents had described their poverty and berated her for not following Jem's orders, an offense they had scolded her for countless times.

"Father just does not know what he's asking of me..."

When Henrika first arrived at Saint-Noel, she had every plan of following Jem's instructions. It was thanks to him that she had been able to enter the academy, after all. It was only the right thing to do.

But unlike her reputation as a spoiled, selfish princess, Mia never did anything bad. The way she treated the outland nobility—and even *commoners*—the same she did everyone else felt odd to even the central nobility like Henrika.

Spreading rumors about this would only be telling others of the Tearmoon's princess's legitimacy.

Henrika just couldn't wrap her head around it. But that was when new orders from Jem made their way to her doorstep, sending a shudder down her spine.

"Fabricate rumors of her sins and ruin her reputation."

Just as it had been every time before, the letter itself had been sweet words that tickled her heart's deepest desires...but those words inspired fear in her.

She ignored his instructions. Spreading truthful accounts of Mia's actions was one thing, but spreading falsehoods was nothing but malicious deception.

“I suppose I can refuse...but I do hope it causes no trouble for my family.”

The last time they met, Jem had stared her down as if threatening her. Seeing his twisted expression, Henrika felt like her eyes had opened. Now that she knew exactly what type of people Rafina and Sion were, she realized what it was she had been trying to do.

“I...was driving a wedge between Her Highness and those two, wasn’t I?”

Once she had made that realization, Henrika distanced herself from Mia, scared that the goal of her attempts would one day be found out.

If she knew, she would never forgive me...

Soon, letters from Jem had stopped, and once again, House Lagerfeld had fallen on hard times. Their lack of food to feed their people had worsened, and poverty was rampant.

Still, there was nothing that Henrika could do. It was hard to contact Jem, and even should she succeed, she had no intentions of following his orders. Someplace deep in her heart was telling her that even should it bring prosperity to the Lagerfelds, she mustn’t listen to him.

She sighed. “I see it has come to a stalemate...”

“Henrika? Do you have a moment?” That voice caused Henrika to jump in the air, she turned around to find...

“Y-Y-Your Highness...”

Mia was clearly a bit puzzled, but she continued nevertheless. “I hope you have been well, Henrika. Is something the matter? You seem quite pale.”

“It is nothing of note. I just have been feeling a tad under the weather...”

“My, have you? Don’t push yourself too hard. You’re the daughter of an honorable viscount family and member of the central nobility which has long served my family. If there is anything I can do, please tell me. For example, if the Lagerfeld Domain ever suffers from poor harvest, or if it ever seems on the verge of famine...”

“Huh?! H-How...did you...?!” Her eyes opened in shock.

Mia responded with a kind smile. “Why, of course I’d know! You’re one of my dear subjects, after all.”

“Waaah! Y-Your Highness...!”

So unprepared for her kindness, Henrika easily caved. Through her tears, she spilled everything. She spoke of Jem and what he had commanded her to do, and when she had finally finished, Mia simply opened her mouth and said, “I see. So that’s how it was.”

Henrika couldn’t help but draw back, afraid she was about to be labeled a traitor. However, Mia’s voice remained calm.

“You are strong for telling me about this. If the Lagerfelds and the people of their domain are in trouble, I cannot turn a blind eye. I will offer my aid right away.”

Henrika was shocked. “Y-You will forgive me...?”

Faced with that question, Mia was silent. She looked as if she was in deep thought.

But in reality, what filled her chest...were the burning flames of anger!

Aaaugh! I see. I see how it is! All those terrible rumors about me that made their way to Sion and Rafina were... Agh! I really don’t want to forgive her, but if famine’s involved, I’m quite sure it will spread to other domains...

The Lagerfeld Domain was quite close to Rudolvon Outland County, and it neighbored Viscount Berman’s. It could cause trouble for Princess Town and Saint Mia Academy.

Henrika is also my acquaintance at the end of the day. It’s hard to abandon her. She was the one to turn herself in, so any extreme punishment would also be... In that case!

Mia spoke solemnly. “No. I shall not forgive you, and you shall be punished.”

“Punished...?” She gulped as Mia gave her sentence.

“You shall follow all orders from Tiona Rudolvon, Chloe Forkroad, and Rania Tafrif Perujin in matters related to food aid.”

For a member of the central nobility like Henrika, having to follow the orders of an outcount’s daughter should bring her shame. At the same time, Rania was the princess of the agricultural country they so belittled, and Chloe was the scorned daughter of a merchant who had bought his title. Henrika should loathe bowing down to all three. Thus...

“If you would like to protect the pride of the Lagerfelds, that is what you must do. That is my punishment.”

Hearing those words, Henrika bit her lip. Still, she lowered her head to the floor in a bow.

Thus, Henrika signed a contract with F.A.T. In return for their aid, Henrika offered her lands, vowing to grow the new strain of wheat in them, and that this would be offered to regions experiencing famine with no hesitation.

Time flowed ever onward, turning from days to years...

That day, Empress Mia had been visited by Henrika, a friend from her schooldays.

"Greetings, Your Majesty."

"It's been quite a while, Henrika. Have you been well?"

While the two were now in their old age, the smiles they shared were the same familiar grins from their days at the academy. For a moment, all was silent, but then Henrika opened her mouth.

"Do you remember the punishment you gave me, Your Majesty?"

"Right... I had nearly forgotten." Mia squinted her eyes as she reflected on her fond past.

Henrika, on the other hand, puffed out her cheeks. "Back then, it brought me so much shame that I despised you! That contract was so foolish I made me dizzy. But I immediately changed my mind. Asking for your help and accepting your punishment was no mistake."

The path the Great Sage had laid before her was a narrow one difficult to traverse. Had the Lagerfelds been more cunning, their family might have risen to even greater heights. Had they ignored the offer of aid, they might have gathered even more riches. The temptation was strong, but that's always why a contract that bound them was so important.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I am proud of the path I walked. Even should that be a path I did not choose for myself but a path you forced me down...I was able to live a wonderful life where I can be proud of the progeny I will leave behind."

Mia responded with a mischievous grin. "Oho! I'm glad if that is the case, but we're not so old just yet! You'll be walking down that wonderful path for a little while longer."

Just like that, the two elderly women shared a tea party of raucous laughter.

And thus, Henrika Lagerfeld's life continued. It was an average

life as the head of a viscount family and friend of Empress Mia's. But when it came to its end, what words would she leave behind? Would it be the victorious declaration of a life free of mistakes, or would it simply be the average words of love for those she would be leaving behind?

The answer to that was yet unknown.

Mia's Diary of (the Lunch after) Horseback Riding Practice

Through some twist of fate, I'll now be participating in this Horsemanship Tournament! I suppose now that I have the opportunity, I should keep a record of it all. So, this diary is dedicated to all my practice, with some writings about the lunches I had on the side.

The Twentieth Day of the Seventh Month

Dongfeng and I researched the best way to get over jumps today. Getting too close could trip his feet, so we analyzed the perfect distance. And speaking of perfect, so were the sandwiches we had for lunch! After all that exercise, the salty jerky and crunchy fresh vegetables made for the perfect combination, just as perfect as the hands of the chef!

☆x5

The Twenty-First Day of the Seventh Month

My muscles are a bit sore, but there's no time for rest! It's quite difficult to judge the best angle for jumps. Going straight into them makes for the best jumps, but being even a little too sharp on the angle causes even Dongfeng to halt his feet.

After all that hard work, we had tahkoes for lunch! It brought me back to my days in Perujin. The juicy meat and spicy sauce are a match made in heaven. I have absolutely no complaints. The taste combined with my memories were incredibly pleasant.

☆x5

The Twenty-Second Day of the Seventh Month

Lunch today was something called a "Quish," pie crust with smoked rouge salmon inside. I always thought pies were supposed to be sweet, but this was quite tasty too! The fat of the salmon gave it a rich taste that blended perfectly with the pie crust.

☆x4

I'm beginning to feel like Dongfeng and I are on the same wavelength. At the very least, we've been able to enter jumps quite smoothly as of late.

The Twenty-Third Day of the Seventh Month

I shared my lunch with Patty, Yanna, and Kiryl today. It was an incredibly fun experience having all sorts of sandwich fixings prepared so that you could build them yourself. You never disappoint, Anne! The bread was even shaped like a horse's head! I was quite impressed with Anne, but...there was something about the shape of the ears that I wasn't quite pleased with.

The bread didn't fit much inside it, and taking a bite caused all the contents to slip out. I suppose that would make it a failure. Still, it was a lunch filled with laughter, so I'll overlook that.

☆x5+

I've been making progress with my training as well.

The Twenty-Fourth Day of the Seventh Month

Lunch Today was pitza lunatiana, covered in stretchy cheese and filled with tomato sauce. Pitza is a specialty of Tearmoon's, and it's nice and crunchy! Being able to eat fresh pitza outside can be considered nothing but a luxury! I was very pleased that the chef figured out a way for this to work.

☆x5

How odd. This was supposed to be a record of my training with lunches mentioned on the side, but at some point it became a record of my lunches with my training mentioned on the side! I seem like a glutton! Just what could explain this mystery...? Perhaps I should ask Bel. It would be terrible if this was an indication of some sort of future-alternating phenomenon!

In any case, I need to practice this Horse Dance hard to get it ready for the main event! I can't look like a fool in front of everyone. This is all for Ruby's sake!

I am quite pleased to see Patty enjoying herself so much. If she can continue to grow both in body and soul in this healthy environment, then maybe... At the very least, I need her to enjoy this time with everything she's got!

Afterword —A Story of Regret or Repentance—

Hello, everyone! It's been a while. I'm Mochitsuki, and I hope you enjoyed volume thirteen. Our second drama CD was released alongside this volume, and I was on the edge of my seat getting to listen to the voice of a certain someone. I do hope you check it out for yourselves.

I once heard that there was a difference between regret and repentance. Regret is turning to your past and despairing, while repentance means reforming from the wrong path you once walked. Regret is becoming fettered to your past and unable to move forward, while repentance is moving forward in a new direction. Those were the thoughts I had in my mind while writing Barbara's story.

While I hadn't realized it before, Mia, too, regrets her past life. However, she doesn't let it stop her, and she instead chooses to walk down a new, proper path. Every time I think about this, I get the overwhelming urge to mutter, "She truly is the Great Sage of the Empire..." It's quite frightening, though perhaps it's the gloomy four-eyes of the Empire that I should truly be afraid of.

Mia: "Oh? Is that praise I hear?"

Bel: "Of course it is, Gra—Miss Mia! He's praising you for being so optimistic! But who cares about that! I have a voice now!"

Mia: "Ah, the drama CD. I was asked quite a few questions in the interview, but...I suppose I didn't say anything too noteworthy. It should be fine, unlike the Princess Chronicles which grows crazier every time I let my guard down... I am a bit worried that it's made me able to fly again..."

Bel: "I was just thinking I'd check it! It was when you danced under the moonlight that you were able to fly, so I'll have to make sure they write that down..."

Mia: “...I see I need to talk to Anne and Elise.”

Lastly, some words of appreciation.

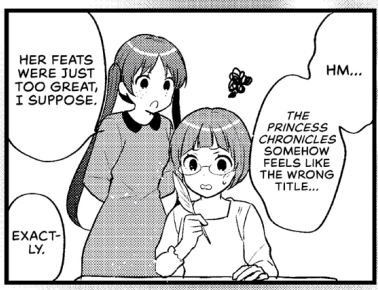
First is my illustrator, Gilse. The horse on this cover is as beautiful as always. This cover is so good I want to frame it!

Next is my editor, F, who saves me in more ways that I can imagine. I look forward to continuing our work together.

To my family, thank you for your support, and also your grassroots efforts to spread the word (lol).

Finally, thank you to everyone who has read this book. I am so thankful to have all of you cheering Mia on.

THE SISTERS CHAT



SHINE
HOW ABOUT LET IT FLOW FORTH! THE CHRONICLES OF PRINCESS MIA, THE HOLIEST SAINT ON EARTH —THE GIRL WHO COULD PERFORM ANY MIRACLE—?
HM, I WAS THINKING MORE...

BWAM
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by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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